This is Irish dance: innovation and tradition in Irish dance teaching and choreography

By Eimear Kelly
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Geography

Statement of originality

I, Eimear Kelly, confirm that the research included within this thesis is my own work or that where it has been carried out in collaboration with, or supported by others, that this is duly acknowledged below and my contribution indicated. Previously published material is also acknowledged below.

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Abstract

This thesis explores alternative forms of Irish dance, examining the work of key choreographers who are creating new Irish dance performances which question what Irish dance is and can be. Innovative Irish dance emerges out of a discontent with the competitive, commercial and regulated nature of traditional Irish dance schools and instead, incorporates training in other dance forms, prioritises dance safety and welcomes improvisation as well as student involvement in the classroom and choreography.

To examine the development and possibilities of new forms of Irish dance, the thesis draws on, and contributes to cultural geographical scholarship on dance, space and performance, research on folk dance and music, and Irish dance studies. Together these bodies of literature examine questions around tradition, modernity, authenticity, creativity, cultural change in relation to national cultural practices, and Irish dance more specifically. The thesis examines three main themes: i) the context, networks and motivations behind alternative Irish dance; ii) innovative Irish dance choreography, specifically the influences, form and values that shape and are inspired through new forms of Irish dance and; iii) the approaches, challenges and possibilities that arise through teaching Irish dance. I explore these themes geographically through an attention to the sites and spaces of alternative Irish dance, such as the studio, stage and classroom, and scales including the body, local, regional, national and international dimensions. The empirical findings were generated through a practice-based approach that drew on my experience as a former champion Irish dancer.

The research has found that for innovative choreographers and teachers, how a dancer's body moves in learning and performing Irish dance reflects an approach that does not oppose individual creativity and tradition. The authenticity of the movement depends on a respectful return to and innovative reworking of this cultural form.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1

Introduction

Irish dancer and choreographer, Jean Butler became famous as the lead female dancer in *Riverdance*, the 1990s Irish dance phenomenon which introduced a new and glamorous side to traditional Irish dance. This took Irish step dancing from the competitive arena onto the performance stage, creating what would become a formula for a successful Irish dance show based on spectacle and visualisation, attracting global audiences and significant box office revenues (O'Connor, 1998). In recent years however Butler has turned away from the standard model for Irish dance shows like *Riverdance* in favour of more experimental and intimate performances. In one of her recent works, *This is an Irish Dance* (pictured on title page), which premiered in November 2015 in New York, she appears barefoot, wearing simple black trousers and white top, dancing to the music of a cellist rather than traditional Irish music (Harss, 2015). This style is exemplary of the intimate, exploratory performances that she now embraces (Harss, 2015) integrating both her Irish and more recent contemporary dance training undertaken at the University of Limerick. Butler is just one of several choreographers who are rejecting both competitive step dancing conventions and the Irish dance show format, bringing alternative movement training to their Irish dance practice and exploring innovative forms of Irish dance. This research examines their work and others who are contributing to this movement towards new and innovative forms of Irish dance.

The term "Irish dance" encompasses many different styles of dancing including set dancing, ceili dancing, sean nós dance, competitive Irish step dance and Irish show dance. The dance show *Riverdance* which had its origins in an interval performance of step dancing in the Eurovision Song Contest held in Dublin in 1994 brought Irish step dance to wider popular audiences. *Riverdance* changed some publicly held views of Irish dance that perceived the practice as embarrassing, old fashioned and rigid, by suggesting that Irish step dancing could be exciting and sexy. Throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, academic debates and research on Irish dance focused on *Riverdance* as a key turning point in the practice of Irish dance. *Riverdance* modernised the dance movements, style, and costuming of competitive Irish step dance, it spurred the production of numerous other Irish dance shows which mimicked the *Riverdance* style, and it presented a

traditional Irish cultural practice in a new commercial form to its international audiences. Recent years have seen a further evolution of Irish dance practice, with choreographers, many of whom were lead dancers in *Riverdance*, now forging alternative forms of Irish dance that explicitly reject the rigidity of competitive Irish step dancing and the stylist conventions of Irish show dance. These choreographers and other Irish dance teachers are also challenging the deeply competitive, regulated and increasingly commercial nature of the Irish dance world.

Contemporary competitive Irish step dancing is an extremely regulated practice with strict rules concerning authenticity and acceptable innovations in dance steps, style and costumes. The practice is regulated by the two oldest and largest Irish dance organizations, An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, known as An Coimisiún, and Comhdháil na Múinteoirí le Rincí Gaelacha Teoranta, known as An Comhdháil. There are several smaller and more recent organizations that also exist but the most rigorous one, which is judged by many as producing the best dancers, is An Coimisiún. These organizations operate on an international scale, with subordinate organizations on a national and regional scale which report to them, and locally, the individual Irish dance schools follow the rules and regulations of the overriding organization (Foley, 2013; Hall, 2008; Kelly, 2014).

Young Irish dancers just beginning their practice in Irish dance, join an Irish dance school but are often unaware of the world they are entering where participating in competitions is virtually compulsory, as is spending money on highly priced dresses, wigs, shoes, classes and travel to competitions. It is clear that the hierarchical nature of Irish step dance limits the free will of the dancer. As my masters research found, qualities such as sacrifice, conformity and discipline become expected of dancers and their families. These qualities are framed as Irish and traditional, in ways which legitimise the highly commodified and in many ways exploitative nature of competitive step dancing (Kelly 2014).

While Irish step dancing is often viewed by its participants as a competitive sport, not a national dance, it is inextricably tied to Ireland and questions of tradition versus modernity, authenticity versus innovation, community versus the individual, and Irishness versus "foreign" influence both within and between the "homeland" and

diaspora. Within Irish step dancing today there is a struggle between a push to innovate and a pull towards retaining traditional "Irish" moves and costume design. There is also a specific geography of "authenticity" that exists, in which Ireland and countries where the Irish diaspora are predominantly located, such as England, United States, and Australia, are seen as having the best and most talented dancers. Meanwhile dancers in mainland Europe and other areas where the practice is more recent such as Asia, the Middle East and South America, are regarded as "old fashioned" in dancing style and costumes, and amateur in their skills. As I will explore in this thesis, the dancers and choreographers whose work I consider are often both implicated in maintaining a continuity of values, approaches, and organizational structures, as competition judges and teachers that derive from the creation of Irish dance as a national dance form, but also working in ways that challenge the centralised, homogenised, institutionalised and standardised world of Irish step dancing.

Debates about dance in Irish culture since the early twentieth century have been characterised by contrasts between the modern and traditional, commercial and authentic, urban and rural. Existing work on Irish dance has explored the practice in relation to questions of Irishness, cultural identity, and cultural purity, especially from the late nineteenth-century, both in Ireland and in the Irish diaspora (Foley, 2001; Foley, 2013; Hall, 1995; Hall, 2008; Hassrick, 2012; O'Connor, 1998; O'Connor, 2013). The significance of dance within Irish cultural nationalism has been a central theme. Irish dance was used by the Gaelic League, an Irish nationalist organization established in 1893, committed to the revival and promotion of the Irish language and Irish cultural traditions, in the "construction of an Irish cultural identity" (Foley, 2001: 35). From the end of the nineteenth century, and particularly after Ireland gained independence in 1922, the Gaelic League sought to "establish an Irishness that was positive and different from Englishness" (Foley, 2001: 35) through the promotion of the Irish language, sport, music and indeed, dance (Shapiro, 2008). The Gaelic League encouraged young people to take up Irish step dancing which "allowed for the cultural and political agenda of the Gaelic League to be embodied in the earlier years of childhood" (Foley, 2013: 148). The cultural values that the Gaelic League and Catholic Church believed were important for the "Irish personality" were taught through Irish dance classes and included "discipline, uprightness, precision, grace, modesty, self-presentation, competitive spirit, co-operation, mutual dependency, decency, respectability and morality" (Foley, 2013:154). Reflecting

the wider gendered construction of Irish national identity through ideas of heroic masculinity and motherhood (Nash, 1997), Irish dance movements were also gendered; young boys and girls were taught how to perform their gender through the dance. The graceful slip jig dance was seen as feminine and only for girls. In addition, boys' soft shoes had heels in comparison to girls' soft shoes which did not, thus boys' soft shoe dances could have movements that made sound, like heel clicks, which would not be added into the girls' soft shoe dance. This taught boys and girls that they should move in certain ways that aligned with their gender, with boys dancing in a more "masculine" way, while the girls danced in a "feminine" way. Irish dance was also rigid and non-sexualized, and in the rare times when dancers danced together the only physical contact would be holding hands or linking arms, this ensured sexual purity, which was so valued by the Catholic Church, was taught through the dance. The Gaelic League held step-dancing classes and competitions, or feiseanna, which occurred at "local, county, provincial and national levels" and were "intended to inculcate pride in local, country, provincial, and ultimately, a national Irish culture" (Foley, 2013: 138). This was a national culture that was cultivated through ideas of a deep, unchanging and pure Irish spirit, surviving in remote rural Ireland especially in the west of the island (Nash, 1993a), and in need of protecting from modern and 'foreign' influences that were often racialised as well as associated with Anglicisation, as epitomised by the League's Anti-Jazz Campaign of 1934. Ideas of moral, spiritual, sexual and cultural purity were deeply entangled and anxieties about 'corruption' underpin the antipathy of the most ardent cultural nationalists to other forms of dancing. This was often in contrast to popular dance practice such as the popularity of people's modern ballroom dancing in public dance halls in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (O'Connor, 2013). Policing how people moved their bodies in dance reflected deep anxieties about the cultural and sexual purity of the nation.

This emphasis on cultural purity was paralleled by an insistence on uniformity in Irish dance styles. The work of the Gaelic League was continued by An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha (the Commission for Irish Dance) after disagreements over the judging of these competitions led to it being established as a separate organization in 1929 (Foley, 2001: 36). Under An Coimisiún (as it is usually known) "official regulations concerning dances, dancers, teachers, adjudicators, dance events, feisanna, clothing and music" were established (Foley, 2001: 36). The form of Irish step dancing that was established under

An Coimisiún as *the* traditional Irish dance form was in fact constructed, taking as its basis one of the existing regional dance forms, the Munster style (Brennan, 1999; Kavanagh et al, 2008; O'Connor, 2013). As Catherine Foley (2001: 36) argues, the aim of An Coimisiún was to "centralise, homogenise, institutionalise and standardise", Irish step dance while the various regional forms of Irish step dancing were marginalised.

An Coimisiún still regulates competitive Irish dance but on an international level today (Kelly, 2014). National organisations report to An Coimisiún in each country, with regional organizations within in each country reporting to the national organisation, and at the local scale, the Irish dance school reports to the organisations above it. The powers exercised within this hierarchy encourage conformity to the Irish dance community and a suppression of individuality in order to be a successful competitor. Each Irish dance school individually sets its own norms and exercises its power differently. However to various degrees they all encourage conformity to the norms of the dance school and the overriding norms of An Coimisiún. Personal qualities such as being willing to sacrifice, being highly disciplined and being accepting of often unacceptable norms regarding expensive costumes and unquestioned authority of the dance school teachers are required for competitive Irish step dancers and their families who support their activity (Kelly, 2014).

This PhD examines the work of pioneer choreographers and dancers who are creating dance performances which question these approaches to what Irish dance is, should and can be, often by drawing on contemporary dance training to create Irish dance works that are very different from the norm. Some have established alternative Irish dance schools where they train students in their unique style in a non-competitive environment, often incorporating practices from other dance forms such as contemporary dance or ballet and drawing attention to safety. Central to their teaching ethos is that students should have more authority over their learning process and opportunities to choreograph their own steps. I use the terms 'alternative', 'new' and 'innovative' to describe the choreographers and teachers who are exploring practicing, performing and teaching Irish dance in new ways. I question how they define themselves and their work, which is a contested issue for them, and something I explore in the thesis (particularly in chapter 4). To date, little academic work has examined alternative forms of Irish dance, and less

work has focused on non-competitive Irish dance schools. This thesis therefore provides novel research into the evolution and implications of this new area of dance practice.

This thesis draws on and contributes to geographical scholarship on dance through my practice-based approach as a former champion Irish dancer. My approach not only includes dancing, which only a few choreographers have done, but combines dance practice with observational and interview research, and includes teaching dance myself. This strategy is central to the originality of my research and its wider contributions to geographical knowledge and dance studies.

My research on innovative Irish dance addresses three key themes: i) social and cultural geographies of alternative forms of Irish dance; ii) the practice and performance of new forms of Irish dance and; iii) the teaching of new and innovative forms of Irish dance. Running through these themes is a concern with the body, networks, scales and spaces of dance practice, for example the studio, stage and classroom, as well as the local, national and globalized dimensions of dance.

In addition, (as I will explore more fully in the next chapter), I consider the development of new forms of Irish dance performance, choreography and teaching in relation to the context in which this work has developed in Ireland and in relation to Irish diasporic geographies of culture and tradition. The decades between the beginning of the *Riverdance* phenomenon in 1994 and Jean Bulter's 2015 performance of *This is an Irish Dance* and the more recent work that I address in this thesis, were a period of profound change in Irish society. This included the economic boom of the 'Celtic Tiger' years from the late 1990s to the economic crash of 2008, the social changes that this entailed especially in terms of the actual and imaginative refiguring of Irish society in terms of consumerism, global capitalism and ethnic diversity. This 'new' Ireland has also been characterized by continued and accelerated challenges to conservative social attitudes regarding sexuality, gender and the family. The figuring of Ireland in terms of neoliberal mobility, modernity and post nationalism has not, however, been uncontested as commentators have sought to consider how traditions, cultural values and senses of collective identity can be reimagined in ways that do not mean a return to the strictures of a cultural nationalism based on cultural purity, social homogeneity and insularity.

This research will thus aim to answer three main research questions that relate to the three strands of the research, each of which has a set of sub questions:

1. What are the cultural geographies of alternative forms of Irish dance in terms of the backgrounds, networks and perspectives of those involved?
Who are the key choreographers and dancers that are developing alternative forms of Irish dance, where are they located, how are they linked to each other, and what is their relation to the major Irish dance organisations and institutions? What are their views on the significance of having a connection to Ireland as an Irish dancer or choreographer? What has motivated them to develop new forms of Irish dance? How do they define their work in relation to ideas of tradition, authenticity and cultural mixing or 'fusion'?

2. How do innovative Irish dance choreographers and dancers address questions of meaning, expression, form and value in their work?
To what extent does the content of their work reflect wider social or cultural issues in Ireland? What dance styles have influenced their dance practice and in what ways do their Irish dance performances reflect their priorities and concerns? How do choreographers and dancers of alternative forms of Irish dance consider the question of meaning and content with their work? How are their performances evaluated by them, what are their perspectives on how they are evaluated by those involved in competitive step dancing and by the wider public?

3. What new approaches to teaching Irish dance are emerging and what are the challenges and possibilities of teaching Irish dance in non-competitive ways?
How do innovative Irish dance choreographers view the traditional teaching of competitive Irish dance? What are the aims of alternative Irish dance schools and how do they differ from mainstream Irish step dance schools? What are the challenges and possibilities of teaching skill and technique in Irish dance while also encouraging self-expression and creativity? How might the teaching of non-competitive Irish dance shape the way in which Irish dance may develop more widely?

In the following chapter, I firstly situate this project within cultural geographical work on dance. I then explore relevant work on folk dance and music which has examined issues that this research is also concerned with, such as concepts of tradition, modernity,

authenticity, creativity and change in a range of traditional national cultural practices. This work is important for understanding how others have dealt with the question of how to engage with a traditional cultural form, a question that is being explored by innovative choreographers and teachers of Irish dance. I then examine work on postmodern dance from the United States and United Kingdom, whose choreographers sought to reject restricting dance norms and redefine what dance could be. Their work parallels choreographers and dancers of alternative forms of Irish dance who are also seeking to challenge traditional Irish dance norms. Understanding how postmodern choreographers dealt with questions of creativity and freedom is useful in exploring how alternative Irish dance choreographers also deal with these issues.

Chapter 3 sets out how this research into new and innovative forms of Irish dance was undertaken. Practice-based research, including participating in dance schools and festivals and teaching the practice myself provided an active and embodied exploration of the possibilities of integrating elements of tradition, innovation and creativity in Irish dance teaching. Practicing in these schools enabled a clear understanding of how they differ from traditional schools, how it feels to move the body in unfamiliar ways to a "traditional" Irish dancer, and how it feels to take part in a class where the focus is not on competitions. Meanwhile teaching the practice enabled me to not only evaluate other teachers and schools for their positive and negative aspects, but to create an alternative dance class situation myself. I was able to engage with the practical challenges of including more creativity and freedom in a class while maintaining a sense of order and teaching the basic movements. This embodied, experiential and reflective practice was key to understanding what practical as well as creative challenges are being addressed by innovative dancers, teachers and choreographers.

Interviews were conducted with key choreographers who are at the forefront of engaging with Irish dance in unique ways which were vital to my research in order to explore how these alternative Irish dance schools and choreographers negotiate questions of tradition, authenticity, and creativity through their teaching methods and choreography, and ensuring that the knowledge produced through my research was not solely based on my experiences and opinions through practice based research. It was necessary to contextualise my practice-based research within the thoughts and opinions of others who

engage in new Irish dance practices, in order to have a more thorough exploration of the practice.

Chapter 4 explores the cultural geographies of alternative forms of Irish dance. This chapter identifies the key choreographers of these forms of Irish dance and examines their personal and professional networks. It explores the choreographers' motivations for changing Irish dance, including the often negative perception of the public towards Irish dance, and the norms of the Irish dance world which limit these choreographers' work. The chapter concludes with debates around how choreographers define their new work.

Chapter 5 explores the dance practice and performance of choreographers who are creating new and innovative forms of Irish dance. This chapter considers the significant influence of contemporary dance on these choreographers and how it affected their technique and style. I explore their considerations of how the quality of these alternative forms of Irish dance are evaluated and the criteria through which choreographers want their work to be judged. I provide my own thoughts and observations on several new performances of alternative forms of Irish dance and also consider the response of both the Irish dance community and the wider public, to these new forms.

Chapter 6 explores the teaching of alternative forms of Irish dance. The chapter begins by considering the innovative choreographers' key criticisms of competitive Irish dance to understand why some are seeking to start non-competitive schools of Irish dance. I compare the traditional Irish dance class to a contemporary dance class, and what benefits can be gained from contemporary dance teaching methods, but also considers the concerns that are expressed by some alternative choreographers about non-competitive schools, I explore these themes through a case study of one non-competitive dance school. The final and key section of this chapter draws on my own practice-based research of teaching Irish dance to explore how to teach skill and technique, with an attention to safety, while also encouraging creativity in Irish dance.

Chapter 2

Situating alternative forms of Irish dance

Introduction

This chapter explores the empirical and theoretical issues which frame my research and underpin the research questions. The chapter is structured around four sections, the first section 'Geographies of Dance' locates my research within work on dance in cultural geography exploring the key themes and approaches that inform my own research. The second section, 'Tradition and Change' draws on research from the humanities and social sciences on culture and tradition with specific reference to work on folk music and dance to examine questions of authenticity and ownership, the politics of cultural change and evolving traditions. In order to understand the nature of alternative Irish dance practice I examine hybrid dance forms, performances of culture and ideas of freedom within tradition. The penultimate section, 'Experimenting and Creativity', situates my research within wider transformations in dance practice with a focus on postmodern dance forms. This draws attention to the democratisation of dance, radical dance groups and institutions, as well as issues of freedom and constraint in improvisation, and finally, embodiment and difference. The final section of the literature review, 'Irish dance and 'new' Ireland' situates the work of innovative choreographers and dancers in the social, economic and cultural changes of the past twenty years and key debates about culture, tradition and heritage in a period of significant change in Irish society.

Geographies of Dance

Dance is one of a range of cultural practices that have been the focus of cultural geography, particularly over the last twenty years. While dance has not had the same degree of attention that other cultural forms have received, especially visual art and music, dance has been the focus of some key debates in human geography and geographers are increasingly engaging with dance, and (as I will discuss more full in chapter 2) to a lesser extent in dance. Geographers, and dance scholars more widely, explore dance as simultaneously symbolic, embodied and practised (Kuhlke and Pine, 2015; Pine and Kuhlke, 2014). Dance, like other cultural forms, can be understood as an expression of collective identities, shaped by and representing social categories of class, nation and ethnicity and ideas of gender, sexuality and dominant social relations, as well

as a means to resist and subvert those ideas and relations. As a mobile embodied practice, dance can be the particular focus of anxiety about the expression of forms of gender and sexuality that challenge heteronormativity and rigid gender binaries, and thus subject to attempts to regulate dance and contain its subversive potential (Cresswell 2006). As I explore more fully below, this has often intersected with the processes through which folk dance forms, including dance forms in Ireland, were institutionalised as national dances and as specific dance forms have been formalized and differently located within categories of 'high' or 'low' culture and characterized as 'traditional' or 'modern'.

Geographical work on dance brings an explicitly spatial attentiveness to its engagement with dance as representational, embodied and practised. This includes addressing dance in terms of its geographies: spaces of practice and performance, spatial networks and circuits of culture; the different scales through which it is defined and made to stand for collective identities (local, regional, national, international, diasporic) and geographically defined (as in national dance styles) or not (as in contemporary dance).

One key focus of geographical work on dance has been the spatial dimensions of dance, in particular how space affects dance and how dance affects space (Edensor and Bowdler, 2015; Pine and Kuhlke, 2014; Stivale, 2003). In arguing for the value of a focus on dance for cultural geography, Paul Atkinson and Michelle Duffy (2019: 20) highlight "the ways in which the movement of dancing bodies is a sensual modality that informs the constitution of place". They note that, "dance is valuable in rethinking space because it exposes basic assumptions as to how we occupy space, and in its emphasis on mobility, questions those forms of knowledge that 'have prioritized place, boundaries, rootedness, territories and landscapes' " (Cresswell, 2006, 56, in Atkinson and Duffy, 2019: 21). This attentiveness to space has been addressed by Derek McCormack (2008) who has explored, through dance, how bodies move in different ways and how this movement can create various kinds of spaces. He argues that "the quality of moving bodies contributes to the qualities of the spaces in which these bodies move" (McCormack, 2008: 1823). In her work on dance performances which have taken place outside in public places which have been chosen for their significance to the choreographers who are often aiming to draw attention to particular social and political issues, Katrinka Somdahl-Sands (2006; 2008) also explored the significance of space. For example, she

argues that the BodyCartography Project, an "explicitly political and geographical ongoing dance project" (Somdahl-Sands 2006: 610) "uses dance in public space as an act of transgression that 'reclaims' the space for the purpose of community dialogue, among the dancers, among the spectators and between the two" (Somdahl-Sands, 2006: 614). Through the act of performance, space takes on new meaning and sense of place for audience members, dancers, and the wider community who live near the site, and whose memories of it last even after the performance itself has finished. Similarly, Tim Edensor and Caitlan Bowdler's (2015: 709) work explores how site-specific dances can "alter the meaning, practice and feeling of urban spaces". This attention to space is also being addressed by dance scholars, such as Valerie Briginshaw (2001) whose book *Dance, Space and Subjectivity*, explores dance on video or film and examines the spaces where these dances occur, questioning what effects these spaces have on the dance and how dance affects these spaces. Other scholars have focused on questions of affect, Barbour and Hitchmough's (2014: 63) practice-based work explores their "embodied experiences of affect, feeling and emotion within the context of site-specific dance". Likewise, Charles Stivale's work on Cajun Dance considers spaces of affect through examining the moving bodies and their "experiences of sound, sight, touch, and scent" unique to each Cajun Dance event.

In this thesis I draw on these approaches to consider spaces of choreographing, learning and performing dance, in ways which are informed by contemporary approaches to dance in geography which consider dance as simultaneously representational, embodied and practised. These approaches have been shaped by the way in which dance became a significant focus in debates about non-representational theory (Creswell, 2012). As Somdahl- Sands argues, "non-representational theory was partially a response to the 'cultural turn' of the 1990s, where landscape became "text" and representation became increasingly important in the 'human' side of geography. Nigel Thrift and others wanted to encourage scholars to also focus on all things that aren't "its" to be represented – emotion, intuition and flow" (Sands, 2013: 1-2). As she suggests this theoretical approach is closely associated with the work of Nigel Thrift, who argued that "dance, as an embodied practice, has a certain expressive quality that exceeds efforts to incorporate it within an epistemology and politics of representation" (McCormack, 2014: 105). Thus dance was interesting to Thrift partly because of its impermanence, and difficulty to capture and record it. Several academics (Creswell, 2006; Lorimer, 2008; Nash, 2000;

Revill, 2004) have critiqued non-representational approaches to dance for not paying enough attention to the "social, cultural and spatial contexts within which specific dance practices were practised" and the "politics of moving bodies" (McCormack, 2008: 1825). This was an important debate in shaping an approach to dance that recognises its often social and culturally scripted character and symbolic function *and* its embodied, affective and expressive possibilities. This is paralleled by work in dance studies on the making of cultural meaning through dance (Desmond, 1997; Dyck and Archetti, 2003; Thomas, 1995). Caroline Potter suggests that there "is a tendency to talk about dance as a form of "embodied culture", meaning culture that exists "in the form of ideas" is "represented through movement and performance" (Kringelbach and Skinner, 2012: 211). However, she argues that this is not the entire picture, as "dancing is a way of making culture - not merely reflecting it" (Kringelbach and Skinner, 2012: 211). Indeed, research in Helene Kringelbach and Jonathan Skinner's (2012: 214) volume also illustrates how the "nation-state as a salient identity category" "can be created, challenged, and redefined through acts of dancing". As Olaf Kuhlke and Adam Pine (2015, viii) suggest, geograpic work on dance is "deeply committed to the representational aspects of dance and to decoding the ideological underpinnings of bodily practice" in relation to national identity, race, sex and gender, and exploring the "spontaneous, unintentional, emotional, and deeply meaningful placing of movements that are non-intentional and pre-textual".

This is also an understanding of dance that has been informed by engaging with dance in practice. George Revill's (2004: 199) work reflects on the "usefulness of 'nonrepresenatational theory' for the study of dance" and is based on his reminiscences of learning French folk dance. For Revill, non-representational theory was a positive turn within geography in that it led to practical acts of making being taken as seriously as objects, thus a corrective to the overemphasis on 'high art' and the elite. From the perspective of someone who participated in French music, both classical and folk, Revill had found folk music and dance sessions to appear freeing and natural, in comparison to the constraints of classical music, thus he perceived the folk music scene to be a perfect example of the non-representational. After attending some French folk music and dance sessions, Revill (2004: 202) felt he needed to learn the dance form in order to progress with his playing, and with the hopes of being able to "feel the music more 'naturally'" like the other folk musicians, who seamlessly switched between playing and dancing.

However, upon learning the dance form, he found being a dancer was not as freeing or unreflective as it appeared. He writes,

> I began to realize that even the most basic movements only become 'natural' by habituation. In addition to this, I had severely underestimated the extent to which dancers need to develop a memory able to map out the movement of the body in space and time. Dancers need to sense aurally and rhythmically where they are in the music at the same time that they have sufficient spatial awareness to know where they are on the floor, where they are going next and where their partner and the other dancers are (Revill, 2004: 203).

Thus through the act of practice, and not just viewing dance, Revill found that to dance actually requires years of thought and practice before it can become so natural as to appear free and beyond cognition. He challenged how dance had been thought about up until that point in geography and within social and cultural theory as "unreflected, unarticulated, practical action" (Revill, 2004: 201). Through undertaking this research, Revill argued against a "conceptualisation of folk music produced and reproduced in a condition of the nonrepresentational" which can lead to the notion of "'the folk' as unthinking reproducers of routine" and deny their ability to be creative (Revill, 2004: 205). He ultimately argued to be "wary of the nonrepresentational when claims are made for privileging its experience as a foundational truth", and against thinking of the non-representational and representational as separate, but instead for the importance of considering both (Revill, 2004: 208). Geographers dancing in order to understand dance in this way is very rare (McCormack, 2003; Revill, 2004; Saldanha, 2005; Somdahl- Sands, 2006), and my research expands on this by engaging with dance as both representational and practised, through exploring the perspectives of key choreographers and through my own dance and teaching practice.

This thesis draws on this work on dance in considering the networks, sites and spaces through and within which choreographers and dancers create, learn, practise and perform alternative forms of Irish dance. My earlier research on competitive Irish dance documented the importance of rules and norms of a given space, be it the training, competition, or performance space, and the contrasting affects these had on different

dancers and their emotions, which in turn informed their dance practice (Kelly, 2014). For example, the training space for competitive Irish dance schools varies widely from dance studios, to school gyms, church halls and community centres. The physical space of the dance class does not appear to affect how dancers feel about their dance class. Most dancers considered the dance class to be a training space and also a social space where they could meet with their friends. However, many dancers felt the dance class had a negative atmosphere just before competitions and subsequently became challenging and stressful. Building on this research, my thesis explores how the training space for alternative forms of Irish dance shapes dance practice. As alternative Irish dance schools are usually non-competitive and dancers are not under pressure to perfect dances for competitions, they may feel more relaxed, and have more freedom for expression and creativity. But this might present new challenges. Is this creative freedom welcomed? Do dancers find creative freedom difficult and challenging, would they rather be told what to do? Or, do they perhaps prefer to "do" Irish dance in the way they always have, rather than change it and exploring doing it in a different way? I explore these questions in Chapter 6.

For competitive Irish dancers, the competition space plays a significant role in their dance lives. This space is often stressful, where dancers feel under pressure, nervous and sometimes scared. Yet some dancers enjoy an "adrenaline rush" from the pressure of knowing they only have one chance to dance at a competition, and feel like they could show off after all their training. Dancers also consider this to be a social space where they had the opportunity to meet friends from all over the country. However the conflicting rules of the competition space which encouraged socializing and serious work, can be difficult for some dancers to balance, while others feel comfortable being serious on stage and coming off and having fun with friends (Kelly, 2014). Being aware of the significance of the competition space, and the difficult and challenging feelings that it sometimes brought up in competitive Irish dancers is important for understanding choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance, most of whom were competitive dancers. Some of their reasoning for how and why they are dancing now, comes from a rejection of the norms of the competition space. In chapter 6, I consider the benefits and negatives of the competition space in relation to non-competitive, alternative Irish dance schools, exploring how their dancers learn and train when this is not for a competition.

The performance space plays an important role for choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance, as this is the space in which they share this new work with the public. Many are venturing into the contemporary dance space, thus rejecting the theatre stage of *Riverdance*, choosing instead a smaller, intimate venue where their work can be seen as something beyond just entertainment. As Somdahl- Sands (2008: 330) writes: "Art gains meaning through the nexus created by how the work is presented, the prevailing discourses about art and the interpretive presence of viewers. The meaning of art therefore changes in various contexts." Indeed, choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance are presenting their Irish dance work in new contexts, the movements look different, the space is different, the viewers are likely to be different to those of *Riverdance*, thus new meaning is given to these new forms of Irish dance. I explore these aspects of alternative Irish dance performance and the performance space in relation to questions of creativity, tradition, authenticity and Irishness in chapter 5. Alternative forms of Irish dance are also shaped by exchanges between choreographers and their mutual awareness of each other's work. One strand of my research considers what places, in and beyond Ireland, constitute key nodes in these networks of exchange, how they relate to Irish diasporic geographies, and the significance of Ireland as a place of origin and 'authenticity' in the practice of new Irish dance forms (which I discuss more in chapter 4).

This thesis also draws on and extends another key strand of geographical work on dance which focuses on "the tension between "place" and globalized cultural production" (Pine and Kuhlke, 2014: viii). A key aspect of this work considers questions regarding the "ability of authentic "local" dances to exist and even thrive amid capitalist cultural globalization, and the ability of innovative counter-hegemonic dance styles to emerge and survive" (Pine and Kuhlke, 2014: viii). Yuko Aoyama's (2007: 103) work, for example, explores "the role of consumption in shaping flamenco, both as an art form and as an industry" in Japan and the United States. Dunbar-Hall's (2003: 3) work "investigates relationships between music and place through analysis of performances for tourists at a prominent site" in Bali. The work illustrates how cultural representation changes when it is intended for tourists, but also shows how tourism has long been "a force in Balinese cultural production" (Dunbar- Hall, 2003: 3). This is a significant area of work which I draw on and expand in my research as I explore questions regarding cultural tradition and change, and indeed the ability of innovative or alternative forms of

Irish dance to exist against the standardised and commercialised competitive and show Irish step dance forms. However, rather than counterposing the local and the global, and the traditional and modern, I am exploring more subtle ways of thinking about cultural tradition and change. I explore these themes further in the following section.

Dance, tradition and change

Examining the development of innovative forms of Irish dance involves addressing what it means to change a "traditional" dance form, especially one strongly associated with national culture. Scholars have highlighted the instrumental role that 'invented traditions' have played in nation building, particularly during the 19th century, where countries and their leaders have sought to construct and determine a specific national culture which would distinguish the people of that country from those of others (Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012). This 'fixing' of culture has often led to certain ways of practicing a culture to be seen as more authentic than others and to emphasise ideas of cultural purity and preservation. This was certainly the case in the nationalisation and standardisation of dance in Ireland by the Gaelic League as part of the Irish cultural nationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Foley, 2001; 2013). However, critical engagements with these versions of tradition and heritage have argued that it is both more accurate and politically progressive to understand culture and tradition are practices which are performed (Friedman, 1994). These cultural practices are passed on intergenerationally, but rather than be seen as fixed or in need of preserving, they are recognized as constantly evolving and changing as they are passed on (Gilroy, 1993).

One key strand of this critical work has challenged ideas of pure and primordial national cultures, instead focusing on notions of cultural hybridity and mixing (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). Much work has emphasized how cultural traditions have long been shaped by the movement of people and the sharing of practices between places. It is not possible to seek out and find a truly 'pure' and 'authentic' cultural practice if 'authenticity' is based on ideas of purity and isolation. These ideas have an important strand of work on diasporic cultures (Clifford, 1994). Since all cultural practices are performed, a particular performance is not more authentic if occurring within the 'homeland' than a practice that occurs far from the 'homeland' even though ideas of authenticity are often strongly associated with notions of territory and origin. The concepts of

diasporic identities and cultures developed by Paul Gilroy and others, challenge the distinction between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' or between 'pure' and 'corrupted' diasporic traditions as well as ideas of cultural purity in the nation-state.

These ideas are closely tied to the politics of cultural ownership. Shared cultural practices and traditions are deeply significant for collective identities (Hall, 1990). In the context of a national tradition which also has a diasporic geography, there can be tensions around the question of ownership, more specifically, who 'owns' a tradition? Is it those within the 'homeland', those who can prove to be closest to the homeland in terms of being born there and living there longest, or those within the diaspora, who may practice a tradition more than those within the homeland in order to maintain ties to the homeland?

This question of ownership is linked to the question of the power relations which shape both cultural change and how it is understood. Though culture and tradition are most productively understood as mobile and dynamic rather than fixed, this does not mean that there are not issues to consider about the conditions under which cultures change. As critical work on the cultural impacts of colonialisation have shown, the West has viewed the colonized and other countries as the 'exotic other' and objects to be studied which were regarded as the inferior 'other', less cultured and less developed than the West (McGrane 1989; Said 1994). The notion that the West was superior and other cultures were beneath them led to them forcing their culture upon other peoples during colonialism, destroying what were considered to be subordinate cultural forms. As a response to colonial discourses of cultural inferiority, anti- colonial nationalisms sometimes articulated strong ideas of returning to a "pure" national culture, as in the case of Ireland (Comerford, 2008; Fanning, 2016; Graham, 1997; Mitchell, 2011).

Judith Lynne Hanna's work on African traditional dance, for example, has explored how British rule and influence suppressed this dance form, and later attempts to revive this traditional culture. As traditional dance and religion in Africa were closely intertwined, the introduction of Christianity by the British meant there was no longer a reason for many dancing occasions. And Victorian ideals meant that African dancing and the pelvic movement involved was seen as "licentious, bestial display" (Hanna, 1965: 14). Because of European influence, a Western education was now seen as important, therefore

children increasingly left home to go to boarding school and were not at home to learn traditional dances. And those in villages who often taught traditional dance, began to move to the towns for work, and were no longer there to teach the others in the village. Traditional African dance changed from "primarily a sacred, communal, ritualistic role to more of a profane, theatrical, and recreational role" (Hanna, 1965:15).

Hanna (1965) describes how growing awareness of the effects of colonization on African cultures led to a movement in the 1960s to bring back traditional practices as long as they did not conflict with plans for modernisation. Traditional dance therefore was revived but changed and adapted to suit new needs. Now often taking place on stage in a theatre, with "fewer performers than usual, a shorter time period for various movement sequences, the absence of "uncivilized" movements, or different use of directions" (Hanna, 1965: 17). Western style costumes have been adopted in place of traditional costumes, and "many of the traditional dance-accompanying instruments which are difficult to construct or learn how to play are dying out" (Hanna, 1965:19).

The politics of cultural change

Issues of tradition, change and authenticity are often intertwined with questions regarding who is changing a practice, especially in terms of those defined as outsiders or locals? Hanna's research on traditional African dance explores how outsiders forced cultural change on the nation, subsequently leading to the suppression of their traditional dance, and how attempts to revive the traditional form have seen it transformed into a practice that aligns with the outsiders' notions of civility and dress. Theresa Jill Buckland (2001), in her examination of the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance in Staffordshire, England, also attends to issues of locals versus outsiders. However, in this case the locals who believe themselves to be the holders of the practice fear opening up their practice to women and those who live beyond the village and how their involvement could change the practice.

The Horn Dance had been led by the Fowell family since 1857 and they controlled who took part in the practice. One of the first issues arose in 1955 when, because of trouble recruiting dancers amongst the family and the local village, a man from another village took part in the practice and "the local press reported on the villagers' certainty that the dance was doomed to extinction" because of this (Buckland, 2001: 7). When girls began

taking part in the dance in the 1970s, because the Fowell family member who was continuing the tradition had six daughters, the villagers and very traditional followers of the English folk dance revival movement who visited to see the dance performed were both concerned with this change. The question of residence also became an issue to the villagers as the Fowell family was forced to move away from the town. Many were not happy to find that their famous village activity was being run by people who lived outside the village and who "furthermore did not appear to be conforming to traditional norms" (Buckland, 2001: 8). Issues with the appearance of dancers, "some of the costumes had not been replaced since just after World War Two" and "the contemporary fashion for men to wear their hair long and even to sport an earring did not please older members of the village" (Buckland, 2001:8).

The Horn Dance was long recognized as an "authentic tradition", yet "what mattered in the 1970s became the authenticity of the person" performing in the dance (Buckland; 2001: 13). And indeed, not all changes continued. The "issue of gender was settled in part by the return of Douglas Fowell's brother, Dennis, to lead the Horn Dance. The scattered descendants of his father, James Fowell, were recruited back into the dance and male great-grandchildren emerged to continue the tradition" (Buckland, 2001: 8).

This research on alternative forms of Irish dance explores ownership and authority over Irish dance in terms of Irish versus other national or ethnic identities, and those from within the traditional Irish dance world versus those who are not. Are those who have an Irish background seen to have more authority over the practice of Irish dance and therefore allowed to experiment with it? Can the same be said for those who have a background in the traditional world of Irish dance? How are those viewed to be 'outsiders' in terms of ethnicity and dance background viewed?

Evolving traditions

Reconsidering the meaning of ideas of tradition, modernity, and authenticity has been a key strand of recent folk dance and music scholarship. While an understanding of folk music as the isolated and ideally unchanging culture of rooted rural 'folk' dominated approaches to the collection and study of folk culture since the late 19th century, there has been a significant shift towards engaging with these cultural forms as continually evolving practices, shaped by cultural exchange and reflecting a complex interplay

between the traditional and modern (Revill 2005; see also Gold and Revill 2006). How do choreographers, dance teachers and dancers of alternative forms of Irish dance engage with questions of tradition and authenticity? Those who create and practice new forms are clearly changing the "tradition" so what does this mean for the prevailing idea of what Irish dance is and what Irish tradition is? The traditional form of competitive Irish dance has itself received criticism for moving away from the traditional regional form it is based on, the Munster Style (Brennan, 1999). Helen Brennan (1999: 152-3) cited one "expert dancer" in the Cork style of Irish dance who believed that, "a substantial part of Irish dancing is so far removed from the traditional form that it can no longer be said to be traditional". The regional styles of Irish dance that existed before the practice was standardized and centralized are often cited as more traditional forms of Irish dance, but there are not any "pure traditions" (Kavanagh et al., 2008:730). Donncha Kavanagh et al. (2008: 730) note that influences on what are regarded as the more traditional Irish dance forms include "Celtic, Pagan, early Christian and Viking eras and their influences in turn - Moorish and Iberian, Roman, Germanic, Norse and Anglo-Saxon".

Indeed, changes to folk or traditional dances are multifaceted and complex, and these dances are always evolving. Andriy Nahachewsky has (2011) critiqued Hoerburger's argument that many folk dances have a distinct 'first existence' and 'second existence' in their histories. Hoerburger argued that in the 'first existence' folk dance is an "integral part of the life of a community", the choreography is "not fixed", the dances are learned "in a natural, functional way", and the dance is not practised as a "conscious revival" rather it is practised "unselfconsciously" (Nahachewsky, 2001:18). Meanwhile, Hoerburger argued that in the 'second existence' of folk dances they were "no longer an integral part of community life" but practised by "specialists only", the choreography is "fixed", they have to be "taught to the dancers by special dance teachers or dance leaders" and they are a "conscious revival or cultivation of folk dance" (Nahachewsky, 2001:18). Nahachewsky used several examples, in particular that of Morris Dance, to disprove Hoerburger's theory, as he illustrated the many different historical phases of this dance. He wrote, "What we should retain from this suggestion, however, is that 'first' and 'second' existences are relative terms, conventions used when speaking of dances that are actually embedded within larger timelines and more complex chronological pictures" (Nahachewsky, 2001: 23). Indeed, this informs my work on

alternative forms of Irish dance, as for many choreographers there is a strong desire for their dance form to remain authentic, but they are aware of its complex history and view tradition as always evolving.

George Revill (2005) also argues that creativity is not incompatible with tradition. Folk music, he suggests, is best understood not as a "precious resource under threat but contingent and pragmatic, drawing on useful materials where and when found relevant" (Revill, 2005: 700). Tradition, he argues, "is an emerging cultural practice rather than its foundation" (2005, 702). Thus for those interested in sharing and keeping the tradition 'alive', there is not a desire to freeze and preserve it, but instead adapt it for particular situations and times to support the needs of those who were engaging with it. For Revill (2005: 699), a key factor that ensures that traditions thrive and develop is the "enthusiasm of particular individuals". Without their passion to share the practices, in varied forms, they can simply disappear. In addition, he argues that 'tradition' does not have to be place bound, but can be made through people linked together and moving in particular geographical networks. This is significant for my own research as I explore how Irish step dance is evolving as a creative practice by those key individuals who seek to ensure it thrives. The following section considers hybrid dance forms and what it means to combine traditional dance practices with other dance styles.

Hybrid dance forms

Many innovative forms of Irish dance are forms that draw on or combine Irish dance with contemporary dance or other dance and movement forms. This research explores what these combinations mean for 'Irish' dance. Is this still considered Irish dance? Do folk forms of dance need to be combined with these more recognised forms of dance to be taken seriously as a style of dance not just as a national dance? Does adding these dance forms to Irish dance reduce the ethnic specificity of the practice? In Breandán de Gallaí's practice-based PhD on "contemporary Irish dance" he explored why he chose to use music styles other than traditional Irish music when creating dances. He wrote,

> I claim that my choices lend themselves better to the movement system that is emanating from my Irish dancing body ... that when I improvise to regular Irish music, what emerges from my habitus is normal Irish dance vocabulary, but when I consider other musical choices, novel

> ideas surface. But there is a small part of me that worries that, subconsciously, using music that I consider to be acceptable, or cool, or of a higher order, is perhaps a way of looking for acceptance from those who search for "transcendent forms of art" – those with a powerful and influential status. They are not my peers, but it is as if I am looking for their approval, as a way of legitimising my work (De Gallaí, 2013: 84).

I explore this more in chapter 4 when considering why choreographers are creating new forms of Irish dance and whether that is partly to turn their work into 'art', instead of just a traditional cultural practice. While this borrowing from other dance forms may be an issue for choreographers of innovative forms of Irish dance, this was also an issue within competitive Irish dance. For example, the toe stand in heavy or hard shoe dancing is from ballet (Hall, 2008). As Frank Hall (2008: 106) argues, "The toe stand raises for some people the question of cultural borrowing: are dancers borrowing from forms that are not indigenous in order to develop the form of Irish dancing?" New forms of Irish dance are much more influenced by other styles of dance than competitive Irish dance, so what does this mean for the practice? Is the practice adopting elements from contemporary dance to be taken more seriously as an art form or is this a way to make the practice a living tradition that is constantly evolving and embracing various influences?

In her work on African dance, Judith Lynee Hana (1965: 20) reflects that, "As a result of the forces of change, local cultures tend to be submerged within the world culture. It will be unfortunate for the world of dance if African dances lose their uniqueness and become homogenized in the Western mold". Mohd Anis Md Nor (2001) also attends to these issues when writing about the influence of contemporary performance and Western dance forms on traditional Malaysian dance: "While new dances form new images through contemporary and avant garde performances, traditional dances are caught between the rush to catch up with the changing scene in new dance appreciation and in sustaining traditional dance forms" (Md Nor, 2001: 66). Choreographers of traditional dance forms are having to adapt these dances to the expectations of audiences, to the new performance spaces of stages, and to "new musical arrangements" (Md Nor, 2001: 66). However, Mohd Anis Md Nor (2001: 67) argues that, "these

influences may have blurred and extended the boundaries of older traditions but have not diminished their likenesses with a traditional dance genre".

Mohd Anis Md Nor describes a Malaysian dance called the Zapin, "a contemporary dance style that blurs but resembles an older style" (2001: 67). The Zapin incorporated elements from Western and Latin dance styles in the 1960s as these styles gained popularity in Malaysia, and they became "a source of material for new Zapin choreographers" (Md Nor, 2001: 70). The Zapin differed between the national version and the village version, with the national version becoming more structured than the village version, it also came to be performed rather than a practice for the community to partake in, and required a specific choreography. Mohd Anis Md Nor argues that

> Zapin is today synonymous with the national version, and imparts different performance constraints than the village Zapin. Zapin Melayu and Zapin Arab remain as village traditions but they are rapidly losing their appeal to the younger generation of west coast Peninsular Malaysia. These traditional forms are even less known to the rest of the Malaysian nation. The various Zapin belong to a common genre but each has taken a different style and meaning. Zapin reveals the continuum of a genre but in different guises- blurring the old but glowing anew (2001: 70).

While the various Zapin exist and all appear as different versions of a practice it seems clear that the village Zapin is being marginalized by the national version. This is interesting as it is similar to the situation within Irish dance where the various regional forms of Irish dance were increasingly marginalized after the practice became standardized. Like the national Zapin, competitive Irish dance was more modern, athletic, required set choreography and borrowed some movements from other European dance forms.

However choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance are more influenced by other dance forms as their movements much more overtly draw on contemporary dance. Unlike the competitive world of Irish dance and unlike the national Zapin there is not one standardized style of alternative Irish dance. Choreographers and teachers create

their own styles reflective of their various dance backgrounds. In some ways this feels like a return to the time of various regional Irish dance forms or the various village Zapin. However unlike a return to a fixed "traditional" form, this is arguably a way of moving towards a more open and evolving tradition. Interestingly, Kieran Jordan, one choreographer of innovative forms of Irish dance engages not only with combining traditional Irish dance with contemporary dance but also has a strong practice of sean nós dance, an older style of dance which is associated with the Connemara region of Ireland. She not only choreographs a style of Irish dance that is strongly influenced by contemporary dance and new or modern, but is also promoting the practice of a style that is not popular or well known in comparison to the standardized version of Irish dance. Therefore she is also reviving and maintaining an old tradition while embracing the new, arguably an example of how traditional dance can evolve through time.

Performances of culture

This work on alternative forms of Irish dance also examines the performances of alternative choreographers. Are they presenting their work as Irish dance, as an alternative form of Irish dance, or just as a dance? Irish dance shows have become expected to be like *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance*, taking these shows and their forms of Irishness as their model. Therefore creativity or veering from this model is often a difficult task, as former *Riverdance* lead dancer Breandán de Gallaí (2013) has found. He has written about the difficulties he faced with "finding support, performance platforms, and indeed the acceptance of the various dance communities" for what he describes as "'contemporary' Irish dance" (De Gallaí, 2013: 83).

Many traditional dances, like Irish dance, have become performances of a particular culture to be viewed on stage. In Yvonne Payne Daniel's (1996) work on tourism dance performances, she argues that tourism dance performances have remained "authentic" and "creative" despite the requirements that they generally adhere to as touristic performances. These requirements include: dance in touristic settings aims to closely replicate a traditional dance style, these performances occur in a space and with costumes which "project specific visual images", they often "generalize myriad cultures within a given society", and "the professional arena of the stage or theatre-patio limits distractions and crystallizes preferred messages in dramatic poignant presentations" (Daniels, 1996: 794). She argues that, "these images suggest exquisite, elegant, exotic, and sometimes

unrealistic visions of life among the carriers of many dance traditions, often deemed unauthentic and not creative" (Daniels, 1996: 794).

Despite this, she argues that "both performers and tourists are often able to experience authenticity bodily and thereby, simultaneously express authenticity and creativity" (Daniels, 1996: 794). But, these ideas of "authentic" and "creative" are defined in a particular way to support the argument that touristic dance performances have these qualities. Daniels (1996, 794) argues that, "Both the audience and performers can identify performances that are more genuine, or profoundly experienced, than routine re-enactments of dance traditions". Here, her definition of "authenticity" is whether or not the performers are genuinely moved by the experience of performing. While many Cuban dancer artists cannot be creative with their dance form in a touristic setting, this work provides these dancers with regular employment which they need. Amid their touristic performances they have opportunities to "become fully involved, fully engaged" and that "through sharing and "jamming" within planned touristic performances, Cuban artists augment their opportunities to experiment and create even when restricted officially" (Daniels, 1996: 792). Despite these examples of creative moments, it is clear that the requirements of a touristic dance performance are fairly strict and limit veering from the norm.

With such strict requirements and expectations of national dance performances, how are alternative ones received? Breandán de Gallaí (2013: 4) writes, "As we head into a new era, one where the *Riverdance* model seems to be losing its sparkle, one would imagine that a new take on the Irish step dance tradition would be hoped for and welcomed". However, "The next Irish step dance metamorphosis is unlikely to have the economic and capital potential as Riverdance, and I believe that traditionalists will be vocal in their disapproval" (De Gallaí, 2013: 4-5). This thesis examines how the work of alternative Irish dance choreographers has been received as this movement has grown in popularity in recent years. Are the public and the Irish dance community becoming more open to a variety of representations and practices of Irish dance? Would the public appreciate non-commercial representations of Irish dance? This is an issue that closely intersects with questions of freedom and creativity within Irish dance, which are explored in the following section.

Freedom within tradition

This research on new forms of Irish dance explores the possibility of freedom of expression, and creativity within a set traditional dance form. For Breandán de Gallaí (2013: 5) since "significant adaptation of the Irish step dance form was slow to be subsumed into the tradition, even though innovation was at the heart of its competition tradition", he wonders how his "experimental Irish step dance work" would be accepted or not by the Irish dance community and by the wider dance and theatre viewing public (De Gallaí, 2013: 5). Indeed many audiences are not accepting of changes within a traditional form because this veers from what they are used to and expect of this form (Hill, 2009). However, others working within that form are eager to explore and expand it, turning it into a "living" tradition (Hill, 2009: 93).

Anthony Shay's (2006: 223-224) work on folk dance in the United States and Canada describes how the youth in ethnic communities are "creating distinctly contemporary work that honors their cultures, but is challenging the hegemonic grip of the older forms of representation. Moreover, they are challenging the concept of allowing themselves to be displayed as "exotic other" in quaint peasant garb, or a "primitive standing in a robe beating on a frame drum at the dawn of the world". Similarly, Juniper Hill's work on Finnish contemporary folk music (2009) explores the Sibelius Academy's radical folk music department which was founded in 1983, known as SibA. The unique goals of the department included: "to make folk music relevant to contemporary society; to recapture the creative processes of a (reimagined) oral past; to give folk musicians the freedom to develop folk music as an art; and to give students the artistic skills, courage, and freedom to create and perform their own personal, original (folk) music" (Hill, 2009: 89). Hill (2009: 89) writes that the "teaching methods were specifically designed to encourage creativity and freedom". She argues that while creativity can occur within the norms and rules of a traditional practice, freedom means challenging the norms and breaking free of them. The goals of the department were established in an attempt to create a music education which was different and better than that of Western art music which was seen as "conservative, old-fashioned, encouraging of passiveness, discouraging and stifling to creativity, and inhibiting of personal expression" (Hill, 2009: 91).

Hill (2009: 90) writes that "contemporary folk music activists believed that Western art music culture restricted creativity of the majority of musicians, because it provided

virtually no opportunities for improvisation and limited composition to a selected gifted elite". She discusses how these activists argued that "every amateur and professional musician, regardless of skill, level, talent, or age, has the ability to improvise and compose and the right to be creative. Finnish folk music pedagogues maintain that creative activities should be actively taught and encouraged in all students at all levels" (Hill, 2009: 90). These arguments about the stifling nature of learning Western music, and the requirements that those who partake in this practice perfect their music and reach the highest level before being allowed to be creative are reminiscent of the situation within competitive Irish step dance. Jean Butler (2006: 143) has argued that competition and commercialization restricts creativity in Irish dance, and she believes that if there were an outlet for dancers to choreograph for themselves, it is possible that they "would not have the tools to think originally". Indeed, any dancer has the ability to be creative but needs to be encouraged and allowed time to do so in order to gain confidence with being creative. This research on innovative forms of Irish dance will explore whether teachers of this form allocate time for creativity in their classes and how this can be done.

The teaching goals of the SibA Folk Music Department are an example of goals that alternative schools of Irish dance could have. These included to "expand students' perceptions and beliefs; to challenge students' socio-culturally ingrained ideas of what they are allowed to play and what counts as "good" music; to transform student' self-image of what they are capable of playing; and to give students the self-confidence and courage to take creative risks" (Hill, 2009: 102). Breandán de Gallaí (2013: 56) has reflected on how, when he found himself in the university setting exploring his practice of Irish dance he was "questioning what is considered to be good dance and good dancing and why there is a sense amongst the tradition-holders that there is a definite 'good' and 'bad' and why everyone yearns for someone 'who just knows' to tell them what is right and what is wrong". […] "I am left with the conundrum – is there really any right or wrong? When you look at how dance form continues to evolve, any amount of possibilities could be viable" (De Gallaí, 2013: 56). He argues for letting dancers decide themselves what they like and to put an end to critique. "Stop using phrases like 'good dancing and bad dancing' – 'well crafted choreography and badly crafted choreography', and instead simply say – 'I like this and I do not like that'" (De Gallaí, 2013: 56). Indeed, this research explores whether this is happening within new forms of Irish dance and

how these arguments can be put to use in the teaching aspect of my research (see chapter 3).

The teaching methods of the SibA Folk Music Department also offer a possible model for how alternative Irish dance schools could encourage creativity within their classes. The department taught students to engage in experimental improvisation and through this the students realized they were capable of being creative in many different ways, no outcome of their creativity received negative feedback, therefore all were acceptable. This "frees musicians from the fear of making mistakes" (Hill, 2009: 105) and "it opens up minds to new possibilities and to different sounds and gives individuals the ideological power to be different, to not conform, to challenge boundaries and to strive for musical freedom" (Hill, 2009: 106). Indeed, dancers who are encouraged to improvise to create new choreography and not critiqued for being "good" or "bad" will have more confidence in choreographing and experimenting beyond the traditional norms.

In this thesis I examine how choreographers, teachers and dancers of innovative forms of Irish dance engage with questions of creativity and freedom in relation to this traditional practice. I explore whether they engage with their practice in the same way as contemporary folk musicians who "value a process of making folk music in which individuals use traditional material as a jumping off point for their own creations, maintaining folk music as a living tradition relevant to contemporary society and providing a vehicle for creative personal expression" (Hill, 2009: 106). Hill (2009: 109) writes that today "musicians and listeners have become accustomed to the transgression of previous boundaries, the parameters of what is known and accepted to be Finnish folk music have changed". Does this happen within the world of Irish dance and those who appreciate the practice?

Experimentation and creativity in dance

The SibA Folk Music Department's radical approach to folk music, and emphasis on creativity and freedom, echoes the work of postmodern dance choreographers who also sought to reject restricting norms and open up the boundaries of what dance could be. The choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance also seek to do the same. Therefore exploring how postmodern choreographers engaged with these issues is valuable for understanding how alternative choreographers may tackle them. Work on

postmodern dance varies as scholars debate what is postmodern, how the term has been applied to dance and how it developed in particular countries, namely the United States and Britain. Much work focuses on the United States which Mackrell (1991: 46) writes is "partly because so much of what we think of as post-modern had its origins on the other side of the Atlantic". I will turn to British work in particular further below. However, most dance work that is seen as postmodern has similar qualities, a rejection of traditional ballet and modern dance norms.

Democratisation of dance

This research on innovative choreographers of Irish dance explores what the practice rejects from competitive and show Irish dance norms, how it operates differently and whether this makes it open to a wider range of people. By drawing connections to postmodern dance one can understand how other choreographers and dance schools created their own dance norms which they felt were more democratic. In Judith Mackrell's work on postmodern dance in Britain she wrote about a key figure in the American postmodern dance scene, Yvonne Rainer whose manifesto of 1965 encapsulated the dance movement. "She voiced an iconoclastic 'NO to spectacle, no to virtuosity, no to transformations and magic and make-believe, no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image…'" (Mackrell, 1991: 45). Her choreography rejected the norms, expectations and restrictions of ballet and modern dance performance and instead explored what dance performance could be when not adhering to these rules. As Mackrell (1991: 45) explains,

> Inspired partly by Cage's use of ordinary sound in composition and by minimalist artists' handling of found objects in sculpture, choreographers began a sustained and systematic exploration of ordinary movement as material for dance. They rolled, walked, squatted, crawled, and if they danced at all it was in so deliberately low-key a fashion as virtually to deny the fact. The image of the dancer as glamorous athlete was rejected in favour of a casual tee-shirt-and-sneakers look. Performers were rarely asked to flaunt their technique, and non-dancers were employed to show that the quirks of the untrained body had their own choreographic interest.

Indeed there was a rejection of the elitism of dance, and the expectation that dancers were athletes who had spent years honing their abilities, instead there was the view that anyone could dance. Postmodern dance moved toward "pluralism and diversity". As Philip Auslander (2004: 113) comments, "…since the 1960s, postmodern dance has employed a range of body types never seen previously in dance, including untrained dancers, dancers with non-athletic bodies, and disabled dancers." Similarly Mackrell (1991: 50) argues that the "rejection of the traditional dancer's image challenged the old punitive imposition of conventional body types, making it possible, in theory at least, for big women to feel as good about themselves as dancers as the lucky elite of delicately muscled sylphs". Postmodern dance also rejected the traditional performance stage and "moved out of theatres and into lofts, galleries and streets to emphasize the ordinariness of the event" (Mackrell, 1991: 45). Dance and other art forms in the twentieth century moved towards more democratic forms. As Curtis L Carter (2000) argues,

> From a social perspective, theater dance in some of its developments has moved from the mainly hierarchical systems of earlier centuries to collective participatory practices. From older hierarchical systems we inherited systems of choreography, provided by the choreographers for execution by the dancers. By contrast, the new participatory systems for artistic production in the twentieth century allow for greater freedom and responsibility for those who actually perform (Carter, 2000: 181).

Indeed, when dancers are no longer just executers of 'an expert's' choreography, they are able to use their minds and their creativity to develop choreography for themselves.

This research on new forms of Irish dance explores how these dance schools are run when not existing within a hierarchical system like competitive Irish dance. There are not any set rules on what an alternative form of Irish dance should look like, and the alternative dance schools create their own norms and dance style which have developed out of their unique preferences and dancing background. Are these schools likely to be more democratic and open to a wider range of dancers? Without the significant expenses of competitions, is the practice open to dancers from a wider range of economic backgrounds? Are these schools less focused on the highly skilled and physically

demanding dancing style of competitive dancing, and therefore opening the dance form up to dancers of a range of abilities (De Gallaí, 2013; Hall, 2008)?

Radical dance groups and institutions

This research on alternative forms of Irish dance explores how innovative dance schools operate in comparison to their traditional counterparts. Many of the radical dance groups and institutions of the postmodern era of dance provide models for how new Irish dance schools could run in a way that promotes creativity and experimentation. One such group is the Judson Dance Theater which began in New York in 1962. Sally Banes (1981: 98) has written extensively about the Judson Dance Theatre, which started "when a group of young choreographers decided to present publicly a concert of dances composed for Robert Dunn's choreography class". As Banes (1981: 99) explains,

> The choreographers of the Judson Dance Theatre radically questioned dance aesthetics, both in their dances and in their discussions in weekly workshops. They rejected the codification of both ballet and modern dance. They refused to take for granted the traditional dance concert format and even the proscenium stage, and they explored the ontological status of dance performance. They not only carried out practical and abstract experiments that called for a new theory of dance, they also initiated political changes in the dance world. They discovered a method of working collaboratively with musicians and designers and with each other; the sixteen Concerts of Dance given by Judson Dance Theatre from 1962 to 1964 were all collectively produced.

Another radical dance collective, like the Judson Dance Theater, was X6 in Britain, which

> functioned both as an alternative dance organization and as a disseminator of alternative ideas about dance. Operating from a large disused warehouse, it gave space, time and support for dancers to work outside the mainstream dance institutions. In direct opposition to the hierarchical nature of most schools and companies, it functioned as a

> collective. It ran classes in alternative techniques, like release and Contact Improvisation. And in its own workshops and quarterly magazine, New Dance, it opened up dance as an arena of political debate (Mackrell, 1991: 49-50).

Both of these groups clearly questioned and rejected dance norms and collaborated on this together and beyond their group. Is there an active discussion within innovative Irish dance schools about what Irish dance norms they reject, or which ones they maintain, and what these decisions means? Do these schools operate as a collective or are the decisions made by the teacher? Unlike the Judson Dance Theatre and X6 where all of the dancers would have been adults already trained in the dance forms they were rejecting, alternative Irish dance schools are training children and young adults who are not well versed in the dance form. But it would be interesting to explore whether any new Irish dance schools do operate more as a collective or imagine how this could be done and whether young dancers could be engaged in any of these issues. One place where this type of active discussion is likely to happen is on the Irish dance undergraduate and masters programmes at the University of Limerick, the only university to have a degree in Irish dance. In chapter 4 I examine how the university is engaging with questions of creativity and experimentation in the traditional practice of Irish dance.

The work of both the Judson Dance Theatre and X6 was clearly political. Banes (1981: 104) writes,

> Within the Judson workshop, a commitment to democratic methods and to the complex collective process led to choreographic modes that seemed to stand metaphorically for freedom. Improvisation, spontaneous determination, the use of chance techniques were not simply formal devices, but carried political meaning. This was a group that wholeheartedly rejected the hierarchical organization of the modern dance world it had become part of, and, by extension, the authoritarian elements of American society its generation had begun to defy.

Alternative schools of Irish dance likewise appear to reject the authority of the competitive Irish dance world. In this thesis I explore what practices the schools engage in and how classes are focused when not working towards a competition. Is there time for improvisation, creativity, or experimentation? Is making time for this and rejecting the norm of competition a rejection of Irish tradition? Are innovative schools of Irish dance making political statements through the decisions they make? Or perhaps choreographers of new forms of Irish dance are engaging more with the political implications of their work?

This thesis explores whether alternative schools of Irish dance encourage dancers to choreograph their own dances. Stephanie Jordan (1989) has explored the importance of the London School of Contemporary Dance, which opened in 1966, for allocating time for dancers to choreograph. For Jordan, "The most significant reason that The Place and LSCD became quickly important as a centre for experiment in dance was that dance composition was included as a regular part of the School's full-time course from its inception, and there were always plentiful workshop opportunities for students to show pieces. In a school for dance training, structures that enabled regular creative work to take place were a radical departure" (Jordan, 1989: 6). Indeed, Irish dancers are all taught to dance, but not often taught how to choreograph. Therefore they gain extensive practice dancing, working on technique, building strength and stamina, but aren't often given the chance to become the creator, or decision maker. Allocated time for this would undoubtedly build dancers' confidence in their choreographing abilities and their creativity. This research examines whether this type of practice occurs in alternative Irish dance schools and on the Irish dance undergraduate and masters programmes at the University of Limerick.

Lastly this thesis examines what constitutes as an alternative form of Irish dance and for whom. Sally Banes (1981: 104) writes that the "most important legacy of the Judson Dance Theatre for postmodern dance was the attitude that anything might be looked at as a dance, if its makers presented it as a dance. Not only the activities of a dancer, but also those of a visual artist, a musician, or a filmmaker might be thought of as choreography, might be re-examined in light of choreographic conventions simply because they were framed as a dance". This thesis explores what alternative Irish dance choreographers and dance schools present as dance. Does 'anything go' or does each

person or school set their own requirements for what they believe to be an acceptable alternative form of Irish dance?

Improvisation: freedom versus constraints

Improvisation was a practice that gained popularity during the time that postmodern dance was emerging because of the opportunities for freedom and creativity that could come by engaging in it. This research on alternative forms of Irish dance explores whether choreographers and dancers engage with improvisation and what it can offer to the practice. Breandán de Gallaí (2013: 45) used improvisation during his practice-based PhD when he was creating "contemporary" or "alternative" Irish dance performances. He felt improvisation enabled him to access "the fountain of one's creativity" (De Gallaí, 2013: 45).

Judith Mackrell (1991) has considered how improvisation during the postmodern dance era was not just used as a practice to assist with choreographing, but that there were entire performances which were improvised. Postmodern choreographers chose to subvert the norms of a performance by engaging in improvisation, which "made audiences a kind of participant in the creative process" and to a certain extent "put dancers on an equal footing with choreographers" […] "Contact Improvisation leveled out distinctions of gender, with women supporting men as well as being supported" (Mackrell, 1991: 50). Carter's (2000: 182) extensive work on improvisation explored how the practice can enable a "virtually unlimited range of bodily actions" and is "essentially free from preconceptions of movement styles and frameworks". Indeed for these reasons it is seen as democratizing dance, enabling anyone, not just trained dancers, to take part and move in any way they want (Mackrell, 1991). This research explores whether choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance value improvisation for creating new works, as a method for drawing on their various dance backgrounds or whether any use it while performing. Improvisation appears to be a rejection of set choreography, something the competitive world of Irish dance highly values. Are dancers in alternative Irish dance schools encouraged to engage in improvisation in their classes, as a way to be creative and experiment with their practice?

But it has also been argued that improvisation is not as freeing as many believe. Carter (2000: 182) argues that improvisation is "much more demanding than following a

prescribed set of instructions. The improviser must create the artistic product as he or she performs it". Thus while not having to perform a particular choreography may feel freeing, it is inevitably more difficult to create choreography while performing. Danielle Goldman's book *I want to be ready: Improvised dance as a practice of freedom* (2010) explores the constraints on improvised dance and those who dance it. She reflects on how much work on improvisation focuses on "spontaneity and intuition" which "implies a lack of preparation, thereby eliding the historical knowledge, the sense of tradition, and the enormous skill that the most eloquent improvisers are able to mobilize" (Goldman, 2010: 5). Goldman's (2010: 6) work aims to illustrate "the ways in which dancers learn to improvise and hone their skills". However, she refers to 'eloquent improvisers', meaning those who are fluent in this method or capable of doing it well, in contrast, radical dance artists believed in anyone being able to dance, or choreograph, or improvise, and that the dance did not have to maintain certain aesthetics. This research explores whether those learning innovative Irish dance forms feel confident in their ability to improvise or choreograph, or whether learning and executing steps feels more freeing than possibly struggling to improvise. This is likely to depend on whether the dancers are encouraged and told that any dance movements are "good", or whether there is the overriding belief that only certain movements are "good" and others may be "bad" or "executed badly" which may hinder their confidence in experimenting.

Goldman's (2010: 9) work also illustrates how technical skills can hinder the supposed freedom that can be found through improvisation by enforcing particular "ways of moving". She wrote of how dancers who are proficient in one style often struggle to adapt to something different: "For example, it is generally hard for a classically trained ballet dancer to collapse quickly to the ground (since ballet training emphasizes verticality and lift); likewise it is often difficult for a modern dancer to extend his or her leg in an exalted arabesque (since training often focuses on groundedness)" (Goldman, 2010: 9). This is important to consider for dancers of alternative forms of Irish dance. Is it difficult for those trained exclusively in competitive or show style Irish dance to move in different ways after spending years training in a certain style which has undoubtedly become natural to them? It appears that most of the key choreographers and teachers of alternative forms of Irish dance are those who have a background in a variety of dance styles, which might be why they feel comfortable 'doing' Irish dance differently. This research also attends to questions of embodied skill. Breandán de Gallaí (2013: 110) has

drawn a parallel between Irish dance and ballet because of both requiring "physical and technical demands which can be mastered only by the very few lucky ones, with the appropriate genes". In addition, these high physical demands mean there is a preference for younger dancers whose bodies allow them to perform at this strenuous level. My research extends this knowledge, to explore whether new and innovative forms of Irish dance are more inclusive, less focused on skill and youth, thus more welcoming to dancers of a range of ages and abilities or disabilities. As these are usually non-competitive practices, it is likely that dancers will not have to train to the same extent that competitive dancers do, pushing themselves and being pushed by their teachers to constantly move faster, sharper, or stronger. While those are stylistic elements that are valued in competitive Irish dance, what elements of the dance and performance are seen as important in alternative forms of Irish dance and therefore encouraged?

An issue to consider regarding using contact improvisation during performance is that it "became more an object of satisfaction to the makers, with less attention to dance as an object of satisfaction for the viewers" (Carter, 2000: 188). Carter (2000: 188) argues that it "changed significantly the relation of the dancers to their audiences, resulting in some instances in ambivalence or even hostility on the part of dancers toward audiences and often leaving general audiences alienated and confused as to their role with respect to the dance". Scholars such as Mackrell and Carter suggest how by the 1980s and 1990s the earlier rejection of traditional dance norms had in many ways been abandoned in an attempt to produce work that audiences value and appreciate to keep up with commercial demands. For Mackrell (1991: 57), "…If, as critics and dance-lovers, we take pleasure in the fact that 'standards' have been raised, we should also mourn the fact that the truculent provocativeness of much early new dance, its willingness to flop, and its refusal to temper experiment to audience taste, have become unaffordable luxuries in our current climate of 'market-place' art". This is important to consider for choreographers of new forms of Irish dance, who as Breandán de Gallaí (2013) has written, sometimes struggle to find a platform for their work. The standard and the physical demand of traditional Irish dance is incredibly high, and many alternative forms of Irish dance reject this and explore less challenging and less impressive movements which audiences may not as readily accept. These economic challenges then are also likely to be an issue faced by choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance. In the next section I situate the

work of innovative Irish dancers and choreographers within the context of social and cultural change in Ireland as well as debates about diasporic Irishness.

Irish dance and 'new' Ireland

Ireland has experienced significant social, cultural and economic change since the early twentieth century, especially in the last few decades. Thirty years ago, Ireland could be described as a predominately homogenous society in terms of ethnicity, language, religion and culture (Inglis, 2017), (even if this overlooks patterns of regional diversity, class difference and the existence of some minority faith groups, and Irish Travellers). Most people were white, spoke English and were practicing Catholics (Inglis, 2017). The Celtic Tiger period from 1991 to 2003, during which Ireland's "economy grew by an average of 6.9 per cent per annum", was a significant moment in the history of Ireland which transformed the country economically, culturally and socially (Kuhling and Keohane, 2007: 1). Ireland, long associated with emigration, experienced high levels of immigration, which created a multi-cultural society. However, this period of transformation had been preceded by previous decades of social change. The country secularized and liberalized in many ways, prompted in part by feminist activism in the 1980s and challenges towards the country's social conservatism as embedded in its constitution (Connolly, 2002). Recent years have seen same sex marriage and abortion become legal by referendum, changes that were arguably unimaginable 30 years ago. And while the Catholic Church once held a significant amount of power, this has shifted to "the state, the market and the media" (Inglis, 2017: 21).

After World War II Ireland chose to prioritise nationalism as a framework for policymaking, unlike most of the rest of Europe, which focused on "integration or inter-dependency strategies" (Girvin, 2010: 351). This proved to have a "long term and devastating impact on the Irish economy and its citizens for over 40 years" (Girvin, 2010: 350). As Girvin (2010: 355) comments, in the 1980s Ireland's "GDP per capita remained stubbornly well below that of the European Community average and the labour force was approximately the same size in 1986 as it was in 1961. Only 30,000 net jobs had been created in twenty-five years, while unemployment soared and emigration increased dramatically. The percentage of those at work declined from 37 percent of the total to 30 per cent over this period." Thus in comparison to other European countries which made the "transition to affluence and full employment after 1950", Ireland did not

and was arguably seen to be poor (Girvin, 2010: 350). Therefore Irish society was associated with poverty and underdevelopment as well as social conservatism and Catholicism. Long term economic underdevelopment thus intensified the magnitude of change in the Celtic Tiger period of low unemployment, higher incomes and increased spending. Irish people had more money than before and could afford to spend on all kinds of things, including cars, holidays and houses (Smyth, 2012). As Smyth comments "Ireland became a bastion of conspicuous consumption" (Smyth, 2012:132). As I will explore below, consumerism and the economic model of neo-liberal global capitalism were not simply celebrated, but before turning debates about ideas of Irish culture and heritage, it is important to address the two key social changes that preceded, paralleled and were entangled with economic change: a. that of the profound challenges to the power of the Catholic church and the social conservatism that had defined the state since independence; the rapid remaking of Irish society as ethnically diverse through immigration.

In 1937 a clause in the constitution acknowledged the special position of the Catholic Church in Ireland. The Church had influence over education, health and social welfare and "was able to shape policy and practice in these fields" (Inglis, 2017: 22). It was also able to significantly influence or even simply direct who it wanted to hold various positions in these fields (Inglis, 2017). The Church held immense power over Irish people who followed the teachings of the Catholic Church often without question, and lived their lives in a way that was deemed acceptable by the Church. But over the past 30 years there has been a significant decline in the power of the Church. This was partly as a result of the Murphy and Ryan Reports in 2009 which uncovered the extent of clerical child sex abuse in Dublin's Catholic Archdiocese and in church run industrial schools and orphanages. These reports led to a "decline in the dignity of and respect for, priests, nuns and brothers" (Inglis, 2017: 22). However, the power of the Church had already been challenged by those advocating women's rights since the 1980s. The Catholic Church now no longer has the same amount of influence over the state and Irish people, as is evident in legislation over the years that has defied the teachings of the Church. In 1985, Ireland approved the sale of contraceptives. Divorce became legal in 1997. In 2013 legislation allowed abortion in cases where a mother's life was in danger. In May 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to approve same sex marriage by referendum. Then, in May 2018, abortion was legalized.

Ireland's approval of same sex marriage by referendum is undoubtedly a defining moment in its history. The country transitioned from being "one of the most socially conservative in Western Europe to a leader in the field of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights" (Murphy, 2016: 316). There was a criminal ban on homosexual acts up until the year 1993, and then just over 20 years later, Ireland becomes the "first country in the world to enshrine marriage equality in its written constitution and the first to legalise same-sex marriage through national referendum" (Murphy, 2016: 316). With 60.52 per cent turnout, there was a high level of engagement in this referendum amongst the Irish people, and out of those who voted, 62.07 per cent voted in favour of the referendum, which was a much higher margin than in votes for other previous contentious issues (Murphy, 2016).

The Irish gay and lesbian rights movement emerged in the early 1970s. It "benefitted enormously from support provided by the Irish trade union and women's' movements of the day and was inspired by an international wave of activism sparked by the Stonewall Riots" (Murphy, 2016: 316). It worked to bring about law reforms during the late 80s, 90s, and early 2000s which provided "much-needed protections for members of the LGBT community". These included the "Incitement to Hatred Act, 1989, the Unfair Dismissals (Amendment) Act, 1993, the Refugee Act 1996 – which led the way internationally in including sexual orientation as a ground for granting refuge – and the Equal Status Acts 2000 and 2004" (Murphy, 2016: 317). A key issue during this time was the narrow definition of what constituted a family in Irish law. This definition meant that a range of family structures were not acknowledged as families under the law, including same-sex partnered families, lone and non-marital families. After other countries began to recognize same sex unions, there were questions over how Ireland would "respond to requests for recognition of marriages and civil unions performed in foreign jurisdictions" (Murphy, 2016: 317). In 2010, civil partnerships were introduced in Ireland, which was a significant victory for the LGBT rights movement. Then in 2015, same sex marriage was finally legalized.

Similar to the marriage referendum, the vote to repeal Ireland's ban on abortion in almost all circumstances was also an incredibly significant moment in Ireland's history, illustrating just how socially liberal it has become. The 2018 abortion referendum also had a high turnout and an overwhelming vote in favour with 66.4 per cent voting yes to

33.6 per cent voting no. Field argued that while a yes victory was likely, few would have predicted the scale. "It had become commonplace for the media to portray the referendum campaign as a close-run thing" (Field, 2018: 624). But the clear vote in favour "sent shockwaves through both Ireland and the wider world" (Field, 2018; 624). The marriage referendum of 2015 and the abortion referendum of 2018 clearly illustrate how the Church no longer has the influence it once had over the Irish people. However, even though the Catholic Church no longer has the influence it once had, and church attendance rates have decreased dramatically, most of the population still identifies as Catholic. In comparison to most other Western European countries, only a minority of people in Ireland state that they do not identify with a religion, (Roder, 2017; 327). But those who identify as Catholic are increasingly "Cultural Catholics" for whom their Catholicism is important to them as "part of their cultural heritage" (Inglis, 2017: 21) and used "to create and sustain meaning, particularly within families and with friends and neighbours" (Inglis, 2017: 25) but not as absolute rule book for how they live their lives especially regarding church teaching on sex, reproduction and marriage.

This strand of social change has been paralleled by the development of new patterns of ethnic diversity in Ireland and new discourses of Irish society as culturally diverse. The Celtic Tiger brought about an unprecedented time of immigration to Ireland. The rapid economic growth in Ireland that occurred from the 90s to early 2000s "produced a situation of significant labour and skills shortages across many sectors of the Irish labour market, thus creating a demand for migrant labourers from both inside and outside the EU" (Kuhling and Keohane, 2007: 52). Irish nationals living elsewhere were also drawn back to Ireland during this time period because of the opportunities that arose from economic growth, and they accounted for two-fifths of the immigrants to Ireland (Kuhling and Keohane, 2007). Economic growth was not the only factor attracting new migrants and returning Irish nationals, the nation's increasing secularity and the population's more liberal interpretation of Catholicism were also appealing. This dramatic increase in immigration was a significant change for Ireland which had such high levels of emigration that from the nineteenth century "the Irish became the 'most internationally dispersed of the European cultures'" (Akenson, 1991: 3 in Kuhling and Keohane, 2007: 53).

Ireland was increasingly celebrated as multicultural and cosmopolitan but Kuhling and Keohane (2007: 51) argue that "state policy and public reaction to migrant workers and to refugees and asylum seekers both reflect an anti-cosmopolitan attitude". The Irish government's decision to provide migrant labourers temporary contracts where they have limited rights illustrates how they do not value them as people who could contribute to creating a cosmopolitan Irish society but only for their use in growing the economy (Kuhling and Keohane, 2007). Temporary work contracts were most likely to be provided to citizens of countries that have a Catholic heritage or a significant white population, thus the government limits the ethnic diversity of the migrants coming to Ireland despite the shift towards the language of diversity in state accounts of the nature of Irish society. In public discourse, migrants are often blamed for a range of social problems, "from inflation to overcrowded and inefficient transport, health and education systems" and the notion that they are stealing "Irish" people's jobs (Kuhling and Keohane, 2007: 56). Indeed, Smyth (2012: 133) writes, "The immigration which had in some senses powered the Celtic Tiger had led in some instances to racism and xenophobia; the irony whereby Ireland – a mass exporter of economic emigrants for over a century – should begin to persecute similar populations within Ireland was lost on those who claimed that these foreigners were coming over here taking 'our' jobs." Thus, in this new multicultural Ireland, immigrants were often not considered Irish, and were not always welcomed. Indeed, anti-immigration attitudes underpinned the change to the basis of citizenship in 2004 when, with majority public support, the Irish constitution was amended to remove the automatic right of citizenship from the children born in Ireland to immigrant parents (Mullally, 2007). Thus though there have been profound changes is relation to ideas of sexuality and marriage, which contrast with the ethos of strict Catholic morality of the first decades of the Irish state, in other ways ideas of Irishness as naturally embodied in those who are seen as 'indigenous' have been slower to change.

Re-imagining Irishness

Nevertheless, there have been efforts by public figures, critics and cultural commentators to address the meaning of Irishness in light of the economic and cultural transformations of the Celtic Tiger years and longer term concerns about the divisive and exclusionary effects of Irishness as constructed within Irish cultural nationalism (including their implications for conflict in Northern Ireland). The key strands of this have sought to

construct alternative geographical imaginations of Ireland, by on the one hand evoking ideas of a global community and on the other, the less well-known but significant effort to rethink ideas of local rootedness in Ireland.

The idea of a global Irish community that emerged in the period of economic boom was entangled with both ideas of economic success and with attempts to refigure Irishness as plural and diasporic rather than ideally pure and most pure of all in Ireland. No longer associated with poverty, the Irish were increasingly seen and, many arguably saw themselves, as successful and empowered, defined by technological progress rather tradition, mobility rather than rootedness, and global capital rather than national self-sufficiency, openness to the wider world rather than inward looking (Gray, 2002). The Celtic Tiger period then was a significant change for the country, changing how others viewed the Irish and how they viewed themselves. However, this rhetoric of the global has also been challenged by those who argue for the continued significance of the local. Echoing wider debates on the relationship between the local and global, Inglis and Donnelly (2011) argue that while Ireland has become increasingly globalised, instead of being less attached to place, and the specific town, country or country, Irish people are arguably becoming more attached: "Increased attachment to the local, the particular, the different, can then, be an equal and opposite reaction to increased globalization and sameness. It may well be, then, that local attachment and identity not only become adapted to globalization, but complement and sustain each other" (Inglis and Donnelly, 2011: 129).

But ideas of the global were also mobilised in specific ways in relation to ideas of the nature and location of Irishness. This time also brought about a new recognition of the Irish abroad. Delaney (2006: 38) argues that the Celtic Tiger meant that "large communities of the Irish-born and their descendants living overseas were viewed no longer as an unfortunate embarrassment to be whispered about in dark corners, but as something to be 'cherished'". Mary Robinson, the president of Ireland in the early 1990s, used her speeches to recognize the Irish abroad and make the people in Ireland aware of the Irish diaspora (Delaney, 2006). Prior to this, political leaders "had ignored the so-called 'forgotten Irish'" (Delaney, 2006: 38). They did not want to be reminded that so many Irish left Ireland because of their "abject failure to create sufficient employment opportunities at home" (Delaney, 2006: 39). Mary Robinson argued that Irishness was

not limited to those who lived within Ireland, and Mary McAleese, Robinson's successor, continued this line of thought, as she emphasized "the 'global' Irish family" (Delaney, 2006: 39). Mary Robinson's recognition of Irish emigrants "re-coded Irish identity as multilocated and legitimized new possibilities of Irish identification and belonging" (Gray, 2002: 124). But the Irish public struggled with seeing those outside the country as Irish. "An initiative in the mid-1990s to extend Seanad representation to a limited cohort of migrants was shelved in the face of widespread opposition to give emigrants a voice in Irish affairs" (Gray, 2002: 125). Ideas of the natural location of authentic Irishness in Ireland persist.

Other critical responses to what was seen as the loss of a sense of collective culture to hyper consumerism turned inwards to find resources for remaking Irishness as a meaningful collective identity, but one that forgoes the ideas of a timeless unchanging and exclusive national culture yet is grounded and 'placed'. Kirby et al (2002: 206) argue for a "cultural politics of dynamic rootedness". They want to propose "a political engagement with cultural possibility that looks to radical, transformative energies in the Irish past and present" (Kirby et al, 2002: 206). In connecting the radical traditions of the past to those today who reject neoliberalism in Ireland, they argue that people can "situate themselves not only in place and time but in a shared community of liberation" (Kirby et al, 2002: 206). Thus they are opposed to a rejection of the past in favour of the modern, and instead see value in the notion of placed modernity, where people today recognize the connections between those in the past and the present who have "contest(ed) the monopoly of power and resources by elites" (Kirby et al, 2002: 206). They believe that this would enable a "radical and transformative engagement with new immigrant communities" instead of a "facile and exploitative culture of consumerist multiculturalism" (Kirby et al, 2002: 206-07). They write, "It is through foregrounding the internal diasporic and dissident energies in Irish culture that a genuine openness towards others can thus be effected" (Kirby et al, 2002: 207). Their critical engagement with the inequities of a neo-liberal economic model, foreshadowed the ways in which the widening inequalities in Irish society were revealed following the economic crash of 2008 and exacerbated by government austerity measures (Crowley, and Linehan, 2012; Keohane and Kuhling, 2014; Smyth, 2012).

Others have challenged the idea of Irish heritage as the cultural property of the 'indigenous' Irish. As Ireland has become a multi-cultural society, the need for the national heritage to reflect all of the people in Ireland has become ever more important. In "Placing Voices, Voicing Places" Cooke et al (2008: 6) argue, "All communities in Ireland, regardless of place of origin, duration of habitation, and stability of location of habitation, possess heritages in Ireland, and national heritage policies must address the heritage needs of all of them." However, the official discourse of heritage in Ireland often hasn't acknowledged all of these communities, and instead has silenced them through a focus on homogenous notions of Irishness. Cooke et al argue (2008: 29) for the importance of rethinking heritage, they write: "A definition of heritage centred on people, rather than one rooted in putatively objective or positivist readings of material culture and landscapes, allows us to see heritage as a protean, dynamic phenomenon with the capacity to register material culture as an evolutionary process, recording shifts and changes in contemporary society." Indeed, this definition of heritage enables it to focus not just on the past, but also on the present, and reflect how Ireland has changed over time.

What is Irish about Irish dance?

In many ways debates about Irish dance in general and specific Irish dance phenomena like *Riverdance* reflect wider questions about the nature and direction of Irish society and the location and nature of traditions whose Irishness matters in more and less and different ways. Themes of consumerism, globalisation, hybridity, purity, plurality, authenticity, ethnic connection and difference run through different readings of *Riverdance* and accounts of diasporic Irish dancing. Reflecting on the significant impact of *Riverdance* on the dance form and Irish culture, Barbara O'Connor (1998: 52) argues that "Because of its unprecedented success, *Riverdance* has in the popular imagination come to be regarded as synonymous with *Irish* dance." For O'Connor (1998: 60), Irish dance can be traced as a practice which transformed on a trajectory from the local to the global, which she feels,

> has had the effect, in some respects at least, of closing down possibilities for Irish dance. The globalization of cultural production places increasing emphasis on visualization and spectacle. Those aspects of Irish dance which do not easily fit this framework are

> evacuated, while those aspects which enhance the creation of spectacle are pursued.

This is significant, as choreographers of new forms of Irish dance are seeking to create works that reject those norms of *Riverdance*, such as the preference for spectacle and visualization, and instead create smaller scale shows. Thus, they are opening up the possibilities of Irish dance through their work. This research considers how they are doing this in an environment in which *Riverdance* is seen as the model of a successful Irish dance show. But is this the environment they are trying to work in? Indeed, many are seeking to be working on the contemporary dance stage, which arguably has different markers of "success" than the commercial stage. These are issues I explore more in chapter 5.

Riverdance has been seen to embody the commercialization of Irish culture, but O'Toole (1996) disagrees and argues that there is a precedent for its blending of Irish dance with elements of Broadway and the American musical:

> For in both its conflation of high art and low art, and its voracious cultural promiscuity, *Riverdance* recaptured a mix of elements very like the staple Irish music and dance culture of New York 40 years before.

He describes how in the 1950s and 1960s in New York, the United Irish Counties Association held a yearly feis (dance and music competition) which encouraged the playing of both classical pieces and Irish tunes in the competition. He also writes of the typical musical selection at the main New York Irish dancehall in the 1950s as including a range of music: American dance standards, Americanised Irish songs, continental and Latin music, Irish waltzes, ceili dance music, and popular Irish songs. Thus O'Toole argues for a recognition of the complex scales of change that Irish dance and music has gone through, and against the notion that Irish dance was a pure tradition that has been blended with American Broadway to create *Riverdance*. This is a key argument that this research draws on in chapter 4, where I explore questions regarding fusion versus authenticity in alternative forms of Irish dance which so often draw on other dance forms to create something new.

The question of the Irishness of Irish dance for those who enjoy this dance form beyond Ireland has also been addressed. While the dance may now be a global practice, it is overwhelmingly practised by those who consider themselves to be of Irish descent (Kelly, 2014). Marion Leonard (2005), for example, has explored how second and third generation Irish people living in Britain engage with Irish music and dance to produce an Irish cultural identity, and that for some this separated them from their family in Ireland who did not partake in "Irish" practices. Likewise, Wulff (2005: 103) writes of the elusiveness of Irish tradition, "Some Irish in Ireland thought it was hiding abroad, while some Irish diaspora were looking for it in Ireland." Thus while those outside of Ireland may expect to find a "true" or "authentic" version of Irishness in Ireland, many in Ireland do not believe it can be found there and think it may be elsewhere amongst those who, living outside of Ireland, often partake in "Irish" practices more than those actually living in Ireland as a way to be closer to Irish tradition and culture. Elizabeth Hassrick's (2012: 93) work also explored the "enactment of Irish identity" through an Irish dance school in the Midwestern United States. Hassrick (2012: 109) writes of how, "Murphy Academy Irish step dancers learned particular implicit and overt rules associated with the physical enactment of 'Irishness' that favoured particular kinds of practices because they were perceived as 'how things were done in Ireland'." So while many participants may see Irish dance as their sport, it does have explicit ties to Ireland, thus it is more of a practice of Irish culture than the description of it as a sport suggests. And as Foley (2013: 193) argues, for those who engage in Irish dance, whether they are aware of it or not, "culture is embodied, expressed and experienced" in this practice. The dance school teachers at the Murphy Academy emphasized their family links to Ireland, arranged workshops with teachers from Ireland and England, and made evident their awareness of the trends in steps and costume coming out of Ireland, as this would enable their dancers "to succeed competitively" (Hassrick, 2012:100). Indeed, in 1995, Frank Hall (1995: 80) wrote of Irish step dancing competitions, "…Winners and losers can be evaluated as dancing more or less in 'the Irish style'." Meaning that dancers from other countries often look to how dancers in Ireland are Irish dancing and assessing their movement style to replicate it, as this will be the winning style at a competition. Thus others are looking to see whether the movements of Irish dancers in Ireland are soft and gentle, or sharp and emphasized, whether they are heavy into the floor with hard shoe dances, or have a lighter rhythm, and what new moves they may be doing.

In exploring the networks and geographies of alternative forms of Irish dance, this thesis attends to questions concerning the "authenticity" of the dancing in various locations, whether this is an issue in alternative forms as they already establishing themselves as "other" or different from the traditional and possibly "authentic" form of Irish dance, and to questions about the ethnicity of those who engage in the practice, whether it is still predominately those of Irish descent or not. Furthermore, I consider how the Irishness of Irish dance may or may not matter to those who are engaged in innovative dance and choreography. Orfhlaith Ni Bhriain (2013: 6) argues that famous Irish dancers who are "concerned with giving Irish dance the same status and respect as other art forms such as ballet" do not "perceive of dance as an expression of national culture or identity but rather as an ontological expression of being." In this thesis I explore the ways in which dancers and choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance explore the question of the cultural tradition and authenticity while challenging the constraints of what conventionally counts as Irish step dancing in their work.

Conclusion

This chapter situated my research within work on cultural geography on dance, work exploring tradition and change, experimentation and creativity in dance, and work on Irish dance. The issues and debates that have arisen within this range of work have framed my research. The rigidity and commercial concerns of Irish step dancing led me to question what alternative forms of Irish dance are occurring and what they are doing differently. I have drawn on geographical work on dance and its attention to the spaces and sites where dance occurs in my work on alternative Irish dance forms. Issues of authenticity, tradition, modernity, cultural change and ownership, and creativity have been explored by scholars whose work focuses on folk music and dance. This work has informed my thinking when exploring these issues in relation to alternative forms of Irish dance. The radical work of the SibA department suggests a potential model for alternative Irish dance schools which encourage dancers to engage with choreography and feel free to be creative with that choreography. The work also suggests how a traditional art form can be redefined, which is an issue alternative Irish dance forms are engaging with. Work on postmodern dance and its rejection of norms, encouragement of creativity beyond the restrictions of the dance form, and freedom for the dancers informs my thinking on innovative Irish dance forms and how they could pursue

creating new forms of Irish dance, while bearing in mind that unlike postmodern dance forms, alternative Irish dance forms have to negotiate the complexities of changing a traditional cultural practice. While work on Irish dance has explored the practice as it has changed and transformed throughout the last century, focusing on questions of Irishness, ethnicity, cultural change and ownership, and directly informed my work on new forms of Irish dance. I draw on this literature to address the themes of the project: the context, networks and motivations of alternative Irish dance forms, questions of meaning, expression, form and value within innovative Irish dance choreography, and new approaches, challenges and possibilities of teaching Irish dance.

The next chapter explores how my research on innovative forms of Irish dance was undertaken. I outline how I used practice-based research, including both participating in dance classes and teaching a class myself, alongside in depth interviews, performance observation and reviews of online material to answer my research questions. In order to situate my research strategy I examine relevant literature on how dance has been studied and how it has been used as a method of research, as well as on practice-based and experimental creative research in cultural geography.

Chapter 3

Researching new and innovative forms of Irish dance

Introduction

This chapter describes and reflects on the way in which my research on the geographies of innovative forms of Irish dance was undertaken. Exploring questions regarding tradition, authenticity, and creativity through the perspective of those who choreograph, teach, and learn these forms was best addressed through qualitative research, both practice-based, including participating in dance classes and teaching a dance class myself, and undertaking interviews, performance observations, and examining online material. Interviews were vital for understanding the perspectives of key individuals who are creating new and innovative forms of Irish dance. My decision to undertake practice-based research alongside employing ethnographic methods was motivated by the need to embody, for myself, the tensions and challenges that come with articulating alternative Irish dance practices. Being able to draw on my training as a champion Irish dancer gave me unique access to the experiences, spaces and people of alternative Irish dance, that surpassed the kinds of insights I would have acquired through interviews and ethnographic research alone.

This chapter is organised around four sections. The first section 'Researching dance, dance as research' explores both how dance has been studied and how it has been used as a method of research. I situate my approach to researching dance through embodied practice in relation to the wider development of practice-based research and experimental creative research in cultural geography. In the second section 'Researching dancers' I provide details of which teachers and choreographers I interviewed and explain the value of these interviews and the value of observing their performances of new forms of Irish dance. The third section 'Research as a dancer' explores my practice-based research, including my participation in dance schools and courses in England, Ireland and the United States. And final section, 'Research as a dance teacher or Research through teaching dance' considers the teaching element of my practice-based research where I taught an alternative form of Irish dance to primary school students in London.

Researching dance, dance as research

My engagement with dance through practice based as well as interview and observational research can be located within the turn to creative embodied practice based methods in geography (Crang, 2010; de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017; Dwyer and Davies, 2010; Hawkins, 2018; Lorimer, 2005; Marston and de Leeuw, 2013; Meyer, 2001; Patchett and Mann, 2018). This development has been shaped by a range of influences including 'social geography's tradition of participatory, activist, and action research that has challenged the hierarchical model of the academic expert and passive research subjects by redistributing authority in the research relationship through collaborative participation and involvement' (Nash, 2013: 50). This work includes geographers who, as part of their research, have created exhibitions, drama, art, films, walks and more (Nash, 2013), sharing their research beyond normal academic audiences, collaborating with those who are often the subjects of research to co-produce knowledge, and being actively engaged in an embodied form of research. Practice based work includes Hayden Lorimer and Katrin Lund's (2003) work on hill-walking in Scotland which was researched through engaging in the act of walking with others. They have pointed to the benefit of actively engaging in the practice they are researching, reflecting that, "ultimately, by moving and interacting with hill-walkers we ensured that our ideas emerged out of, and were re-worked and enriched through, direct embodied experience" (Lorimer and Lund, 2003: 132).

As I discussed in the previous chapter, significant body of work on dance within cultural geography emerged out of a response to Nigel Thrift's arguments regarding dance and non-representational theory. For Thrift, the ephemerality of dance and the difficulty documenting it meant that it was a non-representational practice which "complicates the political spaces of dance" and meant that dance could "not be explained via theories of representational politics" (McCormack, 2008: 1825). However, a number of scholars (Cresswell, 2006; Gagen, 2004; Nash, 2000; Revill, 2004) argued that both the representational and nonrepresentational need to be considered when exploring dance to ensure that the "politics of moving bodies" are attended to (McCormack, 2008: 1825). According to McCormack (2008: 1825) non-representational approaches to dance also suggested that "dance should be interesting to geographers precisely because it encouraged an expansion of the range of practices and processes of which thinking was

composed".

Some of those geographers who have engaged in dance (McCormack 2004; Revill 2004) have addressed the issue with how to capture and make sense of the ephemeral and experiential qualities of dance. Drawing on the technique of Laban Notation, Charlotte Veal (2015: 3) used a choreographic notebook to trace "the embodied dialogues, tensions and conversations taking place within the studio." She wrote:

> My aim here was to diagrammatically represent the multiple corporeal knowledge exchanges being negotiated in and through bodies coming together. In this way, I endeavoured to render visible the creative means of the choreographic *process* rather than focusing exclusively on the final polished *product*. In so doing, I argue that the choreographic notebook can attend to the inherent corporeality of dance practice (Veal, 2015: 3).

McCormack (2008:1830) also argues that "movement notation can sometimes be a useful supplement to qualitative and ethnographic techniques". Indeed, dance scholars and cultural geographers have used and critiqued Laban movement analysis (LMA) (Veal, 2015). McCormack (2008: 1830) cites Cresswell who viewed notation systems as "interesting and problematic because they function to arrest and abstract movement" and "in doing so, they serve to alienate individuals from the experience of their own lived movement". However, McCormack argues for the benefit of these systems when used in conjunction with other methods. These varying methods used to explore dance within geography are part of new and innovative ways of 'doing' geography and producing geographical knowledge.

Beyond geography, dance has long been a subject of study for anthropologists and scholars in dance, performance studies, cultural studies, and sociology who explore dance in relation to questions of culture, gender and society (Leavy, 2009). In her work on arts based research practices, Patricia Leavy (2009: 185) writes that "It is only in the past couple of decades that a broader range of qualitative researchers have begun to incorporate dance into their research, not just as a subject of inquiry (although this is important), but also as a *methodological device*". She argues that this has occurred

> from the overall increase in performance studies, the surge in embodiment research, rises in phenomenology, and increases in health and education research that have identified dance as a therapeutic tool and vehicle for building positive social characteristics (which is now being applied to arts-based research practices) (Leavy, 2009: 182).

Similarly, Kim Vincs, a leading researcher in the creative arts, (2007: 99) argues that dance has traditionally been explored by someone other than the dancer who created the work, but this is being "deconstructed by dance practitioners undertaking practice-based research". This is happening according to Vincs because of "the attraction of mid-career dance artists to the tertiary sector" and an intellectual movement from "positivist, objectively verifiable research outcomes" to "subjective perspectives" (2007:99).

Another way that dance has been used as a method of research is through improvisational dance. This method is used by researchers who are also dancers and actively engaging in their practice (See: McLeod, 2007). Leavy (2009: 188) writes that academic and dancer, Celeste Snowber

> claims that improvisational dance acknowledges and calls on multiplicity - the multiple lives one has, the multiple dimensions of self, and multiple meanings. Therefore, improvisational dance as a research method can provide insights into the life of the performer and create a space for dialogue.

This resonates with Irish dancer and academic Breandán de Gallaí's (2013) research on the modernisation of Irish dance, whose work I explore in chapter 5. He has used improvisation to create performances which explore whether there are "untapped expressive possibilities within the Irish step dance genre" (De Gallaí, 2013: 34). De Gallaí (2013: 45) has used improvisation "to access a portal to the honest self" and "the fountain of one's creativity". De Gallaí's practice is focused on not being attached to or hindered by the rules of traditional Irish dance, as he explains "I have many dance genres colonizing my body, all with varying degrees of proficiency, not to mention the myriad life experiences which heavily influence how I move and how I critically engage with poetic movement" (2013: 45). In addition to drawing from Irish dance movements, he

follows a "contemporary dance model" which he notes is "crucial as a way of allowing the traditional aesthetic to evolve, allowing the emotions and reactions associated with the traditional movements and gestures to drift to the surface, relocating and being represented in some way in the upper-body" (De Gallaí, 2013: 50).

Like De Gallaí, Kim Vincs (2007: 100) used dance in research as "the actual process of thinking" as opposed to "the outcomes of thinking done previously". Vincs has written that she deliberately did not have a methodology when she began her doctoral research on dance which included both practice and theory. She "made a series of dances, and gradually identified the issues each one presented, and the questions that they raised about dance" and "then used these questions to fuel the making of further dances and the development of a methodology for the project as a whole" (Vincs, 2007: 101). She argues that this approach is necessary in arts based practical research because "the nature of artwork is itself emergent" (Vincs, 2007: 101). She argues that having research questions and a methodology in place before creating the art only leads to a "convergent, predictable, and ultimately unoriginal artwork, which, however conveniently it can be articulated in the exegesis, is of little value to the artistic discipline in question, or one ends up with a clear research paradigm, but badly behaved, unruly artwork that refuses to be contained within that paradigm" (Vincs, 2007: 101). For much research in dance, the final performance or the choreography that is created through the research is a significant outcome. For my research, this was not the case, and having already established research questions and a methodology in place did not hinder my research or practice, however it was beneficial to always consider avenues of enquiry and themes, and be open to new research questions which arose through my engagement in innovative Irish dance practices.

The question of the relationship between dance practice as research and the form of the research output has been addressed by dance scholars such as Mary Beth Cancienne, Celeste Snowber and Kim Vincs who have explored how to combine dancing with writing and the benefits of this. Vincs (2007: 102) states that she "assumed that writing an exegesis of my work would be a process of identifying and articulating discoveries I had made through making dances". However she felt that there was not an overriding issue or multiple related issues within her dances which she felt were the results of her research. She determined that it is important to "value the complexity and rich

multiplicity of concerns in an artwork" and not "ignore everything in the dances that doesn't contribute to an examination" of particular identified issues (Vincs, 2007:102). Bearing this in mind, instead of writing a description and analysis of her dances, she used a range of writing methods together including: "symbolic, stream of consciousness writing, movement descriptions, explorations of dance theory, historical narratives and philosophical arguments" (107). Vincs (2007: 111) argues that this methodology allowed her a "freedom of writing within which I found I was able to articulate the complexity of the dance works much more fully than a traditional analysis would have done". Cancienne also feels that, "Choreography and self-reflexive writing allow me to move beyond the constraints of academic writing" (Cancienne and Snowber, 2009: 206). In this case, this thesis is a formal piece of academic writing but was informed by my dance practice and research diary. Having a research diary to describe my practice and my engagements with alternative Irish dance forms enabled me to reflect on any issue that arises whether or not it feels directly related to my research at that time, but upon later examination sometimes became more significant.

Leavy (2009: 191) suggests that dance itself can also be used as "a form of data representation" but this does not occur often in social research. In this situation, a researcher would take the data, perhaps interview transcripts, and choreograph a dance which best conveys this data. Some benefits of this include the data making more of an impact on people because of the interesting and engaging way it is represented and it can "add both depth and texture to the insights created out of traditional qualitative practice" (Leavy, 2009: 192). Bagley and Cancienne (2002: 16) reflect on their research which included dance as data representation:

> In 'dancing the data' we were able to facilitate a movement away from and disruption of the monovocal and monological nature of the voice in print-based paper. Through a choreographed performance we were provided with an opportunity to encapture the multivocal and dialogical, as well as to cultivate multiple meanings, interpretations, and perspectives that might engage the audience in a recognition of textual diversity and complexity.

Though my research was not conceived of as a way of presenting data in the form of dance, the research was a continual process of reflective embodied practice, captured in my research diary, in which what emerges through my practice, as well as from interview and online research, informed and was reflected in my written thesis. As others have also argued, dance in research can be used as one of multiple methods of research in a project. Leavy (2009: 189) argues that, "As with all multimethod research, the point isn't simply to "add" methods but rather to let them inform each other". Indeed, my research included practice based research, both participation and teaching, and interviews and online research. My practice-based research brought a unique embodied aspect to the research, but interviewing others who engage in alternative Irish dance practices prevents my research from becoming solely based on my experiences and feelings. Through this multimethod approach I gained a greater understanding of the changes that are occurring within alternative forms of Irish dance.

Beyond the disciplines of geography and dance, practice based research, particularly within the performing arts is often contested because of its embodiment and ephemerality (Nelson, 2013). Unlike visual arts which result in a final piece or pieces, the performing arts often need to be filmed to have something tangible as a result of the work. For me, regularly recording my thoughts and feelings in my research diary was key in order to capture my experiences of dancing and teaching new forms of Irish dance. Nelson (2013: 9) champions practice based research or PaR, discussing how these projects require "more labour and a broader range of skills…than more traditional research processes and, when done well, demonstrate an equivalent rigour". Indeed, as I discuss further below, my own practice-based research has required my skill and knowledge of Irish dance and required time, energy, and strength to retrain my body into that of an Irish dancer.

Researching dancers: interviews and performances

Interviews

To understand how choreographers and a range of dancers are engaging with alternative forms of Irish dance I undertook interviews, observed performances, and did background research online. Through an initial review of online material, I identified the key choreographers and dance teachers who are centrally involved in the movement

towards alternative forms of Irish dance and who I sought to interview. As my research unfolded, I encountered people who had worked with each other to produce new work, or studied together, and I traced these connections to identify the key participants and networks in this movement. These choreographers and dance teachers are based in Ireland, England and America, and through their work they are pushing the boundaries on what Irish dance is, and can be. As I will discuss more fully in chapter 4, many of these choreographers and teachers spent years competing within the traditional world of Irish dance and performing in Irish dance shows whose norms they are now questioning. They are influenced by a range of dance styles, particularly contemporary dance, and are often creating new forms of Irish dance through the experiences and knowledges they have gained in further study in contemporary dance. Some are creating performances which challenge the norms for what an Irish dance show is expected to be. Others have developed innovative dance schools which are non-competitive and teach their own unique styles of Irish dance.

I contacted these choreographers and dance teachers by email to arrange interviews which occurred in person and online over Skype (See figure 3.1). I undertook semi-structured interviews where the "interviewer prepares a list of predetermined questions", but the interview unfolds in "a conversational manner offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important" (Longhurst, 2003: 117). This enabled me to explore answers to particular questions which concerned me while also letting the interviewee bring up issues that they felt were relevant which I may not have thought to ask (Valentine, 1997). Interviewing these choreographers and teachers allowed me to understand how they engaged with ideas of tradition, authenticity versus fusion, and creativity through their decisions regarding choice of dance movements, the meaning of their performances, and choice of performance spaces, music and general aesthetic. I was able to understand how they came to practise alternative forms of Irish dance, why they felt they could make changes to this practice and why they should, and what they felt it meant for prevailing ideas of Irish dance and Irishness. Miller and Glassner (2011: 131) note that "interviews reveal evidence of the phenomena under investigation, including the contexts and situations in which it emerges, as well as insights into the cultural frames people use to make sense of these experiences and their social worlds". Indeed, these interviews with key choreographers and teachers were an important aspect of my research which enabled me to gain an understanding of alternative forms of Irish dance

beyond just my personal experiences. I undertook all of the interviews in person or over Skype, having conversations that lasted an hour or more. I found virtually everyone open and happy to talk.

Figure 3.1 Interviewees

Interview Research: Name, Date, Location, Description
Kristyn Fontanella, 3 October 2016, Limerick, Ireland Kristyn Fontanella is an American choreographer of new forms of Irish Dance who is currently based in Ireland. She became a tutor on the BA and MA courses at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick after completing her MA there. Kristyn "uses her knowledge of Irish traditional dance in a partnership with contemporary dance. This integration uses the strength and technical skills of her past with the new elements of her forward momentum in the contemporary dance world" (Kristyn Fontanella, 2016).
Colin Dunne, 4 October 2016, Limerick, Ireland Colin Dunne (2015) is a "leading figure in the world of traditional Irish dance, who has made the cross over into contemporary dance and theatre". He is best known for his performances and choreography in Riverdance. In 2002, he completed an MA in contemporary dance at the University of Limerick. Since then he has created solo performances and collaborations with contemporary choreographers. He has been a regular guest tutor at the University of Limerick on both the traditional and contemporary dance undergraduate and masters courses. In 2008 he premiered his first full length solo show, Out of Time, a multi-disciplinary work incorporating dance, text, sound technology and archival film footage. This saw him "return to the question of his traditional dance roots from the perspective of a contemporary practitioner" (Colin Dunne, 2015).
Catherine Foley, 4 October 2016, Limerick, Ireland Catherine Foley designed and is the course director of the MA in Irish Traditional Dance Performance at the University of Limerick, the first of its type in the world (Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, 2016).
Breandán de Gallaí, October 2016, Skype

Breandán de Gallaí is an Irish dancer, choreographer and dance academic who is interested in the "contemporisation of Irish dance" (Ériu Dance Company, 2016a). He is currently focused on choreographing new performances for his dance company, Ériu, which he describes as "heralding a new era in Irish dance" (Ériu Dance Company, 2016b). In 2013 he completed a performance-based doctorate at the University of Limerick during which he choreographed dances which pushed the boundaries of what Irish dance performance has been. For several years he was the lead dancer in Riverdance. As a young dancer, he trained mostly in Irish step dancing but also gained experience in Ballet, Modern, Jazz and Tap dance at a dance academy in Chicago where he graduated from in 1988.

Peter Harding, 28 October 2016, London

Peter Harding, along with Suzanne Cleary, form the duo performing act, Up & Over It. They have been a "regular fixture on London's alternative cabaret scene for many years" (Up & Over It, 2016b). They describe themselves as "stretching the concept of Irish dance to its limits, we mix it up with electro-pop, nouveau folk, alternative percussion, experimental video, contemporary dance and cabaret" (Up & Over It, 2016a). Their performances and videos often mock the norms from their Riverdance background and present Irish dancing as it hasn't been seen before. They are known for their percussive hand movements or 'dancing with their hands', a concept known to Irish dancers as a way to think through their choreography without actually doing it, and instead moving their hands in the same way as their feet and legs would be. They write on their website, "Fun and in-your-face… this is Irish dance for the post-pop generation" (Up & Over It, 2016a).

Marie Clerkin, 3 November 2016, Skype

Maire Clerkin was born in London to Irish parents, but currently lives in California. When she was living in London, she travelled to teach at the Univerisyt of Limerick on the Masters in Irish Dance Studies. Her expertise is in theater and Irish dance, and this is what she taught. She also taught at Blas, the summer school course in Irish Dance and Music at the University of Limerick on the recommendation of Colin Dunne in 2013 and 2016. Her work often incorporates theatre and comedy, exploring the norms of Irish dance and how the practice has affected her life.

Nic Gareiss, 21 November 2016, Skype

Nic Gareiss is an American dancer who draws from various percussive traditions to create a movement practice that seems unique to him alone. He is most strongly influenced by Appalachian clogging, Quebec step dance and Irish step dancing. Nic studied for a semester abroad at the University of Limerick during his undergraduate degree in Anthropology and Music at Central Michigan University. He later returned to the University of Limerick to do a masters in Ethnochoreology. During his Masters, Nic trained had individual training with Colin Dunne every week for a semester. In 2016, he did a residency with Colin Dunne at the Irish Arts Center in New York. In the same year, Jean invited him to perform for and chat with her students on the Irish Studies course at New York University.

Erin Hayes, 10 January 2017, Skype

Erin Hayes and her partner Andrew Vickers started the non-competitive Irish dance school, Club Rince in New Jersey in 2015. Erin began Irish dancing at the age of five in the United States and competed at the World Championships in 2002 and 2003. She undertook a masters in Dance Science at Trinity Laban from 2011- 2012 and strongly advocates for the consideration of safety in Irish dance practice. Andrew Vickers began Irish dancing at the age of nine in Ireland and started dancing professionally at the age of 15. He has performed and created choreography for several smaller professional Irish Dance shows, and created his own, *Imagine Ireland: The Show*. He also undertook the Masters in Traditional Irish Dance Performance at the University of Limerick.

Kieran Jordan, 19 January 2017, Skype

Kieran Jordan is an American choreographer and teacher based in Boston in the United States. She has a Masters in Contemporary Dance Performance from the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance. Her dancing "reflects her broad interests and experience, ranging from traditional Irish dance to contemporary modern dance. She has a particular passion for sean-nos dance- the improvised "old-style" tradition from Ireland- and through her innovative recordings, teaching programs and performance projects, she has played a major role in introducing it to the US" (Kieran Jordan, 2016a). She teaches "non-competitive Irish dance", her classes "emphasize body awareness- rhythm, musicality and performing skills. She brings a holistic approach to

her teaching, incorporating exercises in composition, improvisation, and mind-body techniques" (Kieran Jordan, 2016b).

Leighann Kowalsky, 26 March 2017, Skype

Leighann Kowalsky is an American choreographer, performer and teacher in Irish dance and modern dance in New York. She has never competed in Irish dance and trained in modern dance alongside her Irish dance practice from a young age. When she was young, she did workshops with Jean Butler, through the Irish dance school where she was training. Leighann's Irish dance teacher trained in the same competitive dance school as Jean Butler. Leighann and her dancers have performed at the New York City Irish Dance Festival multiple times in the past ten years where Darrah Carr's dance company also performs.

Darrah Carr, 21 April 2017, Skype

Darrah Carr is an American choreographer based in New York. She draws on contemporary dance to create a new form of Irish dance which she calls ModERIN, "a playful combination of the words modern (dance) and ERIN (an Irish American reference to Ireland)" (Darrah Carr Dance, 2016a). She writes, "I source from two genres- traditional Irish step and contemporary modern dance. I feel two pulls – one toward tradition and another toward innovation – and seek to create dance in the space between" (Darrah Carr Dance, 2016b). She started her dance company, Darrah Carr Dance, in 1998 which holds performances throughout the United States.

Placing in me: questions of positionality and interview research

Who I am undoubtedly affected the interactions I had with those I was researching (Hopkins, 2007; Valentine, 1997). It is therefore important to reflect on my position as a researcher, dancer and teacher in the production of this thesis. "As Schoenberger explains, 'questions of gender, class, race, nationality, politics, history and experience shape our research and our interpretations of the world, however much we are supposed to deny it. The task, then, is not to do away with these things, but to know them and learn from them'" (Schoenberger in Valentine, 1997: 113). While having an Irish name and being Irish may have enabled me to form an initial connection with Irish dance

choreographers and teachers who also have Irish backgrounds, I did not notice this to be very significant.

What seemed more significant were the connections made through my positionality as a former competitive Irish dancer. I believe this helped my initial access to interviewees, since they would recognised my appreciation and understanding of their work and that I was interested to consider it from an academic perspective. My in-depth understanding and intimate experience within the Irish dance world facilitated shared understandings between myself and interviewees. Being able to talk from personal experience about the competition world, the performance world, certain dance movements or dances opened up, as well as deepened our conversations, enabling me to access insights that might not have been otherwise shared. I spoke to Kristyn Fontanella and Colin Dunne, for example, about release technique applied to Irish dance and I was able to question how it would work with certain movements because I knew how Irish dance was usually done. We could speak about doing Irish dance and doing it in these new and different ways without them having to explain to me how Irish dance is usually practised. My questions were informed by my understanding of the dance, why people might want to change it, or perform outside of the main performance arena. My questions were thus not an outsider's questions who would need a basic understanding before even considering more in depth questions. However, one of the challenges with having this inside knowledge was how to translate this shared embodied experience into text, for it to make sense to readers with little or no knowledge of Irish dance. There were times in meetings with my supervisor where I got up to dance, as words failed to describe something. So there were times that describing an embodied experience proved difficult, but I worked to explain any movements described in writing as clearly as possible.

The fact that this group of choreographers and dance teachers who made up my interviewees form a very small network meant that for the most part they all knew of each other and some had very close friendships, or working connections. The more people I interviewed, the more I was able to connect with others. I became to feel part of their group in that I could talk about people from knowing them. Many of them would mention each other and each other's work. When I interviewed Peter Harding, he mentioned his friendship with Breandan, and I was able to talk about how Breandan was a lovely person to chat to. When I spoke to Breandan initially he had mentioned that I should speak to Darrah, that they were friends, and when I spoke to her, she also

mentioned her friendship with Breandan and I was able to tell her that Breandan told me to chat to her. There are several other examples, and overall I felt like I had gained an insider's understanding on their network. Is it possible that feeling like an insider made me less critical? I have considered this, but I think I frequently stepped back and considered the arguments that were being made. I definitely did not feel swayed by having any connection to the interviewees. Ethically I ensured that interviewees clearly understood what my research was about and that they gave me permission to interview them. One challenge that I encountered was one of the innovative Irish dance schools in New York did not want to speak to me once they knew I was speaking to another local school.

My being both an academic and a dancer was helpful in various ways in the interview research. With some interviewees, the fact that I was also an academic and doing academic research on Irish dance enabled us to connect. Breandán de Gallaí and Darrah Carr have both done PhDs on a contemporary, alternative approach to Irish dance, Darrah was finishing hers at the time of our interview. Erin Hayes has a Masters in Dance Science with a focus on Irish dance. Catherine Foley is a professor at the University of Limerick and did the first ever PhD on Irish Dance. So all of them valued the idea that more research was being done on Irish dance and they could see the importance of this. Meanwhile Kristyn Fontanella, Colin Dunne and Kieran Jordan had all completed the contemporary dance Masters at Limerick, Colin and Kristyn both taught there, so again there was an appreciation of the value of dance, and particularly Irish dance, within academia.

Interview analysis

I recorded the interviews on my iPhone and transcribed them as soon as possible. I undertook coding, "the assigning of interpretive tags to text (or other material) based on categories or themes that are relevant to the research" of my transcripts (Cope, 2003: 445). Coding can be "broken down to include steps such as identifying patterns and forming categories as well as the procedures of defining first-level descriptive codes, developing second-level analytical codes and coding along a particular theme or concept" (Cope, 2003: 445). The identification of themes and patterns in interview transcripts enabled me to have a better understanding of the data and ask new questions of the

research material (Cope, 2003). As I undertook interviews, I paid attention to trends and issues that emerged so I could address these issues in future interviews.

Performance viewing

I observed performances in person and online, and these performances enabled me to see what choreographers were creating as 'new' versions of Irish dance (see table). I traveled to Dublin, Ireland to see Jean Butler's performance of *this is an Irish dance* in Feburary 2017, Breandán de Gallaí's performance of *Linger* and Margaret McAuliffe's *The Humours of Bandon*, both in March 2017. In August 2017 in London I saw Marie Clerkin's performance of *The Bad Arm*. I watched The D'Amby Project's performance and rehearsals in New York in May 2017. And while I intended to see Darrah Carr's dancers dancing in New York, the outdoor show was cancelled due to bad rain so I ended up viewing their rehearsals. I watched performances by Up & Over It, Kristyn Fontanella, Darrah Carr, Colin Dunne and Breandán de Gallaí online. These performances varied widely and thus it was important to experience the range of work being produced as new or alternative forms of Irish dance. Some of these shows were the first contemporary dance performances that I had ever seen, thus I did not have a background of contemporary dance knowledge in which to contextualise this. My dance performance knowledge came mostly from viewing fairly traditional Irish dance performances such as *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance*, the types of shows these choreographers were trying to veer away from. Nonetheless, I was able to recognize how their performances differed from the traditional Irish dance performance, and through my knowledge of practicing Irish dance I had in-depth knowledge of the movements and could therefore recognize what was an Irish dance movement, as well as the modifications made to, and departures from, traditional Irish dance practice.

Figure 3.2 Observational Research

Date and Location	Description
February 2017, Project Arts Centre, Dublin, Ireland	*This is an Irish Dance* A duet created and performed by Jean Butler and cellist Neil Martin, exploring the connection between dancer and musician, music and movement, and a man and a woman in a performance.
March 2017,	*Linger*

Smock Alley Theatre, Dublin, Ireland	A duet performed by Breandán de Gallaí and Nick O'Connell, a younger man. The performance explores questions of ageing and sexuality.
February 2017, Dublin, Ireland	*The Humours of Bandon* Written and performed by Margaret McAuliffe, this humorous show exposes some of the realities of the cut throat world of competitive Irish dance while following a young girl on the eve of the biggest competition of her teenage life.
April 2017, Viewed online	*In Limbo* Kristyn Fontanella's work, In Limbo, sits in between the worlds of traditional and contemporary. This performance includes "four live musicians and six dancers who have taken the basics of what makes this tradition so attractive and translated it into a new but still recognisable language of music and dance".
May 2017, New York	*Visited D'Amby Project* In May 2017, I visited the D'Amby Project, a school and performance company in upstate New York which offers training in both traditional Irish dance and contemporary dance. I was able to observe their classes, professional rehearsals and their performance at the Annual NYC Irish Dance Festival.
May 2017, New York	*Visited Darrah Carr's dance company* In May 2017, I was able to watch Darrah Carr's dance company rehearse for their performance at the Annual NYC Irish Dance Festival (their performance was ultimately cancelled because of rain). She also has several clips of performances online, so I have been able to experience her unique combination of traditional Irish Dance and modern dance, a style she describes as ModErin.
August 2017, Tristan Bates Theatre, London, England	*The Bad Arm* A one-woman show written and performed by Marie Clerkin. This comic play recounts Marie's childhood experiences of being the disappointing daughter of a successful Irish Dance teacher in 1970s London. It exposes many of the realities of the competitive Irish dance world, while also exploring feeling out of place and not Irish enough in Ireland, but too Irish to be English.

August 2017 Online	*Up & Over It videos* Up & Over It has created over 30 short dance videos, some of which were selected for international film festivals and were later turned into live performances. These videos often use satire to explore a range of themes including questions about Irishness, Riverdance, and competitive Irish dance.

Research as a dancer

Practice based research

Throughout my PhD I participated in several dance classes and courses which had various effects on my body and provided a very embodied way of researching these forms of dance (See table 2). This included taking part in a London based Irish dance school from September 2015 to September 2016. I then took part in the Fusion Dance Fest in Limerick in August 2016, which was described on their website as being "anchored in traditional Irish Dance forms but introduces a variety of Irish show styles, body percussion, tap dance, contemporary, sean nós and hip-hop into the mix" (Fusion Fighters, 2016). The six- day course ended in a performance at the Millennium Theatre in Limerick. After this I took part in the Michael Flatley Dance Academy in London for two semesters, autumn 2016 and spring 2017, a course in which former dancers from Lord of the Dance show taught dances which are done in that show. I also took two contemporary dance courses across that same time. All of these courses were based in London. In May 2017, I visited New York, where I had a private lesson with Darrah Carr, and did some dancing with the D'Amby Project in Red Hook, upstate New York. Then in June 2017 I took part in Blas, International Summer School of Irish traditional music and dance at the Irish World Academy at the University of Limerick. I made instructors aware that I was researching while practicing to ensure this research was undertaken ethically.

While research training in the humanities and social sciences usually refers to methodological skills of gathering and interpreting different sorts of research material, my research training was also a process of retraining my body. In order to engage in my practice-based research, both the learning and teaching elements, my body needed training to be physically capable of the dancing. Therefore I began my practice-based

research early to retrain my body in Irish step dance which I had not actively practised in several years since I stopped competing as an international champion dancer in 2005. This is a dimension of embodied practice in research that is only beginning to be addressed in cultural geography. In Jennifer Lea's work on Thai Yoga Message, for example, she reflects on how engaging in the practice herself meant her body was physically affected by the research process as it was "recording the changes in its tissues and offering a perspective to reflect upon the learning and teaching of TYM (Thai Yoga Massage)" (Lea, 2009: 469). Indeed, Lea's work is a model for my own engagement in practice-based research. As my research proceeded, my body changed, and I recorded my thoughts and feelings about this in my research diary. Actively dancing again after several years of not dancing was very hard on my body. After the first two-hour dance class I attended, I could barely walk for a few days after as all of the muscles in my legs and feet were incredibly sore. While my body had not forgotten how to move as an Irish step dancer, I did not, at that time, have the strength in my muscles to dancing for two hours. After that first class I moved quickly into doing difficult dance moves that as a former champion dancer I had the knowledge and capability to do, but my body struggled and I suffered from shin splints (pain along the inner edge of the shin bone), possibly because I was older, or because of the dramatic increase in training in a short time, or because I was practicing on carpet over concrete, not a sprung floor. Effort to address this pain was part of my practice-based research.

My practice-based research enabled me to physically understand what elements of Irish dance were maintained and what elements of other styles were brought into new forms of Irish dance. I was able to explore what it feels like to move in sometimes very strange and unfamiliar ways. I was able to examine which movements felt freer or more creative, while reflecting on how my lack of training in some of these movements meant that with more time the difficult movements may have felt easier. I was able to experience how different classes felt, how dancers were treated, and how elements of training, perfecting, creating, exploring, learning of a traditional dance, changing of a traditional dance, were apparent to different degrees and affect one another.

The initial research at a local London competitive school served to retrain my body in Irish dance and in the process was a way of exploring a dance class which operated outside the two main long standing Irish dance organizations, An Coimisiún and An Comhdháil. While there are not any clearly alternative schools of Irish dance in London,

in October 2015 I joined an Irish dance school which exists within a smaller network, the Celtic Association of Irish Dance, CAID. I joined this school to explore whether it operates as an 'alternative' Irish dance school, and how it is different to the two major networks, a question that I have been able to explore much more fully through participation as opposed to just observing classes. In Jeannifer Lea's (2009: 469) research she writes about the "value of learning as a methodological strategy". She states, "Becoming a participant rather than just an observer allows the researcher to reflect upon the process of learning in a particular context, and allows understanding of how instructions are given formally and informally, how they are followed and how the context facilitates or complicates the intended practice" (Lea, 2009: 469). Indeed, through my research I gained an in-depth understanding of how this dance class operates, and found it was virtually the same as any another school within An Coimisiún. These dancers were actively encouraged to compete, attend several local and major competitions throughout the year, work to perfect the steps they are taught in class, and wear the full costume at competitions.

My return to practicing Irish dancing brought out new ideas and issues to explore and consider with every dance class I attended, which I would not have understood without engaging in the practice myself. Indeed, as previously noted, geographers have attested to the strength of ideas which arise and are influenced and changed through practice-based research (Lorimer and Lund, 2003). Through my research I was able to experience the authority of the dance teacher over the younger dancers and how I felt more of a right to make my own decisions as an adult, but yet still somewhat subordinate to the authority of the teacher. It often felt difficult to go against the norm of the class. This type of feeling or experience would be impossible had I only been observing the class. While I often decided whether I wanted to push myself to finish drills or keep dancing and whether this was a good decision for my body, other times I went against what I would want to do personally and did what I was told to do. Many of the young girls often seem to really struggle to speak up and say they are in pain or cannot dance. Many may say they have a sore knee or foot and are sometimes allowed to sit out for a while and then encouraged by the teacher to get back up and dance again.

I also became much more aware of how there is no tradition of proper stretching or a slow warm up before class. As already stated, I struggled with shin splints when returning

to dancing and did a lot of research on how to manage and heal them. Stretching and warming up properly is one aspect of this management which at times I felt needed to occur outside the class. I felt that perhaps I looked like I was showing off my flexibility or trying to appear better than others who were not stretching. But for me, I did not wish to injure myself further and felt it was important to warm up slowly before jumping into quite a tough warm up which they do in class. As I attended classes more I felt more confident stretching in class, but I often began my warm up outside the classroom.

This meant that the space outside the dance class often became an interesting space of interaction. I stretched and found myself teaching another young dancer stretches as she told me "that doesn't look hard", expecting every warm up to be something difficult, which is what she is used to in class. I was doing simple calf stretches which are incredibly beneficial to Irish dancers whose calf muscles are constantly used as they dance on their toes, yet this young dancer didn't know how to do them. Amongst the dancers there is a lack of knowledge on the importance of stretching. Some of the dancers enjoy doing handstands or cartwheels or other dance routines they have made up, but often doing these things in class leads them to be told to do their Irish dancing by teachers. One day I started teaching one of the girls some yoga arm balances, then other girls saw us and were interested, and I ended up with about five girls around me wanting to learn the yoga poses. Another day I saw dancers working together to choreograph a dance to a pop song. This raises questions of: Is there a space for this playfulness within an Irish dance class? Does the playing have to be limited to Irish dance moves or could these other moves be integrated into an Irish dance? Or simply a fun way of taking a break from Irish dancing before returning to it? I was able to explore these questions during the teaching element of my research (see below).
My practice with this school enabled me to experience the significance of competition and the authority of the teachers to actively encourage dancers to compete. Several times I had three teachers at once asking me why I'm not competing, then determining the next competition date and telling me to go to it. Many dancers and teachers struggled to understand why I was dancing if I was not going to compete, as virtually every dancer competes. One difference within the smaller networks of Irish dance is that they are often more accepting of adult dancers as competitors. And as I have danced at a high level, the teachers at this school were eager for me to compete for them and do well as this would reflect well on them as a dance school. It was very difficult to keep saying no,

or coming up with excuses not to compete as the teachers really wanted me to and there is an expectation that they take the time to teach you and you in return go and compete under their school name. I was told I am 'wasting my time just dancing in the class' and I 'should be competing' because I'd do really well. My practice is seen as a waste of time if not for competition, and them taking the time to teach me steps yet not compete was perhaps seen as a waste of their time. Perhaps my dancing well and not competing was seen as a waste of talent and time practicing if I do not 'go and show it off'. However, the point of my practice is to focus on what an innovative Irish dance school could be. (This will be addressed in a section on teaching below).

My participation in the Fusion Dance Fest was my first opportunity to explore new or different styles of Irish dance. While this was an interesting opportunity to explore these styles, it was stressful, as there was a lot of choreography to learn for the final show which was not sent to us ahead of time. I was not simply a researcher watching the course nor was I just taking part in this course to explore the styles, I was one of the dancers who was expected to learn everything and perform it well for the final performance. There were many serious and highly placed competitive dancers on this course from the UK, Ireland and the US. There was clearly some competition between dancers for who could be seen to stand out, whether for future shows, or to have better parts in this show. I was room mates with two young women who were treating the course like an audition for future show careers. They went out to the pub or the cinema with some of the teachers on the course, which seemed strange and not fair to other students who were not invited. The days were long on this course, it was a lot of dancing and the rehearsals on the last couple of days felt tiring. It gave me a very eye opening view into what it would be like to be a dancer in these shows, dancing a piece and then rushing off stage to quickly change and try to pull on a new outfit when you are sweaty, and then rushing back to dance again, hoping that you have not missed your slot. In many ways it brought me back to my competitive days, some of the same feelings of being stressed that I wouldn't perform well enough or annoyance that teachers were shouting and giving you looks of disdain, when you're working hard to do the steps correctly. I was ultimately glad the week was over when it ended.

I participated in the Michael Flatley Dance Academy in London weekly from September 2016 to April 2017. This was a brand new school that Michael Flatley had started with

the intention of teaching Irish dancers how to perform, which is something they do not learn when focusing on competitions. The show style of Irish dance is very different, a little more theatrical, and often gendered in particular ways as I discuss in chapter 4. The Michael Flatley Dance Academy taught students the choreography from the Lord of the Dance show, and taught us how to 'perform'. There were two teachers, a man and woman, who were leads in *Lord of the Dance*. I was interested in practicing in this school to see what a non-competitive Irish dance course would be like, to see how we would be taught and what we would learn. The course had several locations throughout London, many for beginners and younger children, and just a few for experienced dancers. In the location I attended for experienced dancers, I was one of two students, the other being a 16- year old girl, so the course was not popular. The school is no longer running, likely because the numbers of students were low. There was talk about how some competitive students wanted to join but their teachers would not let them, or they were keeping it a secret that they were attending. There are rules within An Coimisiún about dancers not learning from teachers outside their own, unless it's a workshop or course that has received An Coimisiún's approval, which Michael Flatley's academy had not.

I enjoyed learning the show choreography, and exploring the performance style of Irish dance. I enjoyed the opportunity to make up my own steps for the soft shoe dances. However, some of the hard shoe pieces were tiring and rigid. I wrote in my diary, "I find my feet want to mess around with fun trebles or more difficult beats. I don't want to do the specific arm movements, or put my hands behind my back on my bum when I just keep kicking them, and I don't want to do a very tiring dance… I find myself wanting to play around more, wanting to dance in a more fun way, less stiff and precise." We would learn a piece and perform it for the teachers several times, and the speed that you need to move at and the precision of the moves, would mean that I sometimes felt physically sick when I finished. It is very intense cardio. Some weeks I felt like the teachers were bored to be there. They would have conversations right in front of me and the other student but not include us. Or other times one of the teachers would be in a bad mood, and she would shout unnecessarily. There was no competition or performance at stake, and clearly no need to be shouting about getting a dance correct on that night.

While participating in the Michael Flatley Dance Academy, I also took part in two contemporary dance courses to explore a style of dance that strongly influenced

choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance. In the contemporary classes it was interesting to see how the teacher would ask us how the movements felt in our body, whether they felt good or not, which was alien to me as an Irish dancer where the focus is always on how the movement looks. There was definitely more of a sensitivity to how someone feels. I wrote in my diary: "We did a new move in the choreography dropping onto the floor and I dropped on my bum a couple of times and the teacher said 'Ow, don't do that' and clearly felt for my pain, even though it really didn't hurt much. But this is a stark contrast to the Michael Flatley dance class where when I would kick my shins accidentally with my hardshoes (something that really hurts) while doing a quick and unfamiliar move, I get told that I'm "not lifting my legs enough."

The contemporary class would be divided into sections, always having a dedicated warm up time, then perhaps working on movements in one spot- leg movements or torso and arm movements- and then perhaps movements across the floor, and then a dance itself. We would sometimes have dances that took place on the floor, laying down and swinging the legs, or rolling across the floor. One time I had bruises the next day on my hips from rolling on the floor. It was interesting to notice small similarities between the dance styles, like big movements were preferred in both Irish dance and contemporary, and really using the floor, as in travelling as far as you could. At times while I was in the contemporary class learning something new, I would want to do Irish dance. The contemporary dance classes were in nice studios with big mirrors, which I did not have for the Irish dance classes, and it made me want to make use of them. I would want to do Irish dance and do those movements that I can do to a high level without thinking.

In May 2016 I went to Red Hook in upstate New York and visited the D'Amby Project. The D'Amby Project was started by two dancers who never competed in Irish dance, but instead took part in a non-competitive Irish dance school which had a focus on performance, and learning ballet and contemporary technique. The D'Amby Project includes both a dance school and a performance company. The school offers "dance classes beginning with traditional Irish training and advancing to contemporary" (The D'Amby Project, 2016a). In describing the style of their dance performances they write, "The rigor of an Irish dancer can be found in sharp articulation, with emphasis on accuracy and unison. But adding breath and life-bearing musicality allows for a new vocabulary, and a unique combination of quiet control and nuance" (The D'Amby

Project, 2016b). I wanted to visit and take part in classes with this school as a way to explore their unique style, and to see how their combination of Irish dance and contemporary works.

However, at the time I visited they were preparing for an upcoming performance that weekend, and there was not time for me to learn choreography that would have been very new to me. I watched and did take part in small ways, and also offered my opinion when asked, because I was a trained Irish dancer. The teachers were very friendly and welcoming towards me. The main teacher, Leighann, brought me with her to a local boarding school where she teaches contemporary dance, and I watched and took part in that class. She also let me lead the dancers through a small yoga sequence as a cool down. She was very conscious of making me feel involved. I was able to do some Irish dancing in the studio at this school, just playing around. There was an aerial silk, and Leighann taught me some moves on the aerial silk. We also talked about and did some various yoga poses, such as headstands and handstands, as Leighann had done circus training where she learned how to handstand. In her D'Amby Project classes, I took part in some core strengthening that the teenagers do at the end of their class. I jumped in and took Leighann's place in a group dance, so Leighann could watch it and instruct the other dancers. She also invited me to do a hard shoe reel with them where all the dancers are lined up and then they go down the line, each dancer doing a step. So in comparison to a researcher who is simply watching and observing, I was able to take part in a variety of ways, because of my Irish dance background and background in other dance styles and yoga.

In New York City, I took part in a private lesson with Darrah Carr. Like the D'Amby project's engagement with contemporary dance, Darrah Carr draws on contemporary dance to create a new form of Irish dance which she calls ModERIN, "a playful combination of the words modern (dance) and ERIN (an Irish American reference to Ireland)" (Darrah Carr Dance, 2016a). She writes, "I source from two genres- traditional Irish step and contemporary modern dance. I feel two pulls – one toward tradition and another toward innovation – and seek to create dance in the space between" (Darrah Carr Dance, 2016b). She started her dance company, Darrah Carr Dance, in 1998 which holds performances throughout the United States. From 2005 she began "an educational program in order to introduce Carr's blended style to the next generation of dancers.

Company members offer classes and workshops for children and adults in both hard shoe and soft shoe style Irish dance, as well as in their trademark ModERIN style" (Darrah Carr Dance, 2016c). Participating in the private lesson with Darrah enabled me to explore her ModERIN style in an embodied way. The combination of arm and leg movements was a lot to think about, and some of the movements were very strange and different to me. Had I had more lessons, and more time working within this style it would likely become more natural.

The final piece of participatory research I undertook was attending Blas, the International Summer School of Irish traditional music and dance at the Irish World Academy at the University of Limerick. I was interested in attending this course to see what it was like as a non-competitive, educational course within a university which specialized in Irish dance. I was interested in seeing what was being taught, and how particular teachers were teaching. Blas seemed to be popular with European dancers. There were a couple of young American dancers from a non-competitive dance school in Utah. There was one serious competitive dancer from Mexico who was actually a dancer with one of the schools I trained with in the United States. But for the most part it did not appear that serious competitive dancers from Ireland, the UK or the US attend this summer school. So the attendees at this course were very different from the attendees at the Fusion Dance Fest. Overall my participation in a range of forms of Irish dance and contemporary dance gave me an in depth understanding of new forms of Irish dance that are being taught and performed.

Figure 3.3 Dance Practice and Teaching

Dance Practice	Attended 2 hour class twice a week September 2015-September 2016, London	Carragher Academy of Irish Dance
Dance Practice	One week course August 2016, Limerick, Ireland	Fusion Dance Fest Limerick
Dance Practice	Attended 1 hour class once a week September 2016 – June 2017, London	Michael Flatley Irish Dance Academy

Dance Practice	Attended 1 hour class once a week November 2016 – December 2016, London	City Academy Contemporary Dance Course
Dance Practice	Attended 1 hour class once a week January – February 2017, London	The Place Contemporary Dance Course
Dance Practice	One private lesson May 2017, New York	Private lesson with Darrah Carr
Dance Practice	One week course July 2017, Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick, Ireland	Blas Summer School of Traditional Irish Music and Dance
Dance Teaching	Taught once a week September – December 2017, London	Taught an after school Irish dance class once a week at a local primary school in North London from

Research as a dance teacher

While participating in innovative Irish dance classes enabled me to evaluate and reflect on their teaching and how it feels to learn from them, I wanted to teach a class myself as I felt this would truly enable me to understand the practical challenges of teaching an alternative Irish dance class. Through my participation in others' classes I was able to determine what aspects I felt were beneficial and could do similarly, what aspects I felt were not beneficial, and what aspects I felt were missing and could be added in. While through participation I could come to various conclusions about how an alternative Irish dance class could be run or made better, without teaching a class myself, it would have been impossible to really understand the practicalities of teaching a class that is child centred, where children learn the basics of Irish dance, and also have the opportunity to be creative and make up their own dances.

Conventional Irish dance teachers who teach under An Coimisiún are required to attain their Teagascóir Coimisiúin le Rinci Gaelacha (TCRG), a teaching certification. If they do not have their TCRG, their dancers cannot compete within An Coimisiún. The TCRG exam is open to dancers who are 20 years old and over, and consists of six sections including a practical test in stepdancing, a written ceili dancing test, a practical test in teaching ceili dancing, a practical test in teaching stepdancing, a written music test and an oral Irish language test which is optional if the applicant lives outside of Ireland. The way the test is set up ensures a passing on of the traditional ceili dances, most of which dancers do not learn until they prepare for this exam. Teachers are not trained in appropriate teaching methods for different learners, how to plan a class or plan how to progress from teaching more basic moves to more advanced, nor is there any training of appropriate warming up, cooling down, stretching or strength training. Teachers from the smaller Irish dance organizations may or may not have had to pass any examination before becoming a teacher. Some of these organizations are only currently working on setting up an examination which is inspired by the TCRG exam. Of the alternative Irish dance teachers I am exploring, only Kieran Jordan has a TCRG. Thus I knew I would not be the only teacher without a formal qualification, a qualification which mostly ensures the traditional ceili dances are passed on and that one can dance themselves and can teach someone else dance steps. With a background of competing extensively in Irish dance to reach the Championship level and experience of teaching steps to other children in class, I felt confident that I had the same capabilities as many with TCRG qualifications. I also felt that my background in regularly practicing yoga provided me with more knowledge of stretching and strength training.

For the teaching strand of my research, I drew on literature in dance education which considers the best practice of teaching dance to children (Carr and Wyon, 2003; Coe, 2003; Green, 1999; 2000; Mainwaring and Krasnow, 2010). Literature on dance education has argued against the teacher as the ultimate authority who teaches with control and restriction, and instead for the importance of a learner-centred pedagogy in which teachers critically reflect on how their teaching affects students (Coe, 2003). This method can enable teachers to better respond to their students' needs and develop students' confidence in their dancing and in their lives beyond dance (Coe, 2003). Green (1999; 2000) has focused on the myth of the ideal body in dance education, arguing that movement is often put on dancers, they are often shaped by their teachers or taught that

they have to fit a particular mold, and if their bodies do not suit it, they cannot contribute to their dance practice. She argues instead to teach movement from the inside out, to show students they have something individual to give to dance, and to provide students with "a sense of ownership of themselves and their contribution to dance" (Green, 1999:98). She writes: "It is important to change the way we teach dance in order to change what is valued in dance" (Green, 1999:98). Similarly Fortin and Sienedtop (1995) explore the work of a non-traditional dance teacher who has a focus on somatic approaches or mind-body awareness in dance. This enables dance teaching to focus not just on the appearance of movement, but also the feeling, helping dancers to individually express themselves, rather than just mimic the teacher's style. Other work has drawn on psychology, dance pedagogy, sport pedagogy and physical education, exploring how to best teach a dance class and create an environment in which dancers' have a high self-esteem, they want to invest effort in their practice, and they feel appreciated for their work and progress (Carr and Wyon, 2003; Mainwaring and Krasnow, 2010).

I also drew on a well established strand of practice based research and work with children within geography (Cele, 2006; Horschelmann and Shafer 2005; Kesby 2000; Latham 2003; Matthews 1984a; 1984b; Pain and Francis 2003; Panelli et al. 2002; Punch 2002; Trell and Van Hoven, 2010; Young and Barrett 2001). Scholars have written extensively on research with children which emphasizes that "children are not simply passive objects dependent on adults, but are competent social actors that make sense of and actively contribute to their environment" (Barker and Weller, 2003: 207). Because of this focus, "more 'inclusive' and participatory research agendas and children- centred methodologies" have been developed (Barker and Weller 2003: 207). These creative participatory methods, such as allowing the children to draw maps or take photos, enable a view into children's experiences which would not be possible through traditional interviews and questionnaires which cater to adults (Morrow, 2008). Like these methods, my research was appropriate for children in that it is a practice they can take part in and engage with creatively. I allocated time in the dance class for creative movement, improvisation or choreography which they loved. Allocating this time for the dancers to move in ways they want, to play with Irish dance movements that they have learned and enjoy, or to incorporate other dance styles that they already know, was a way to explore how Irish dance can be both a specific dance form with its repertoire of skills, styles, steps and dances, and a dynamic, open and evolving cultural practice. While I played

traditional Irish dance music to learn traditional dances, I played other popular music during this time to encourage creativity.

In addition to drawing on relevant literature to prepare for dance teaching, I also undertook a day of one-to- one training in dance teaching with Dr. Lorna Sanders, the course leader and senior assessor of Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance's 'Diploma in Dance Teaching and Learning', and the author of Dance Teaching and Learning: Shaping Practice (2013). And I undertook training in 'Safe and Effective Dance Practice in Teaching' at Trinity Laban. This was a key module in Trinity Laban's 'Diploma in Dance Teaching and Learning' and provided training including preparing for and recovering from dance practice, basic anatomy and alignment, injury awareness and management, creating a healthy environment, and applying healthy practice principles to various age groups and abilities. This was really valuable for considering how to safely warm up my students, and how to encourage their engagement and interaction in the class.

The time I spent dancing in various dance schools, or on dance courses, in the early years of my PhD brought up questions about how I would run my own class and important aspects that I felt should be integrated into the class. These were elements such as warm ups and student creativity. Prior to undertaking the research, I felt that a potential problem could be dancers feeling unsure or, not confident in their ability to be creative. I had even questioned my own ability at being creative, possibly because my education in Irish dance had only taught me how to execute other's choreography, not to create my own. And that is why I felt it was something that should be regularly done in a class to increase dancers' confidence in their own ability to choreograph. Being able to execute someone else's choreography is what dancing is in all forms, and this is certainly not a mindless task, but allowing dancers to use their minds even more so and to draw on their creativity would give them even more confidence that I thought could impact other aspects of their lives.

I was very excited about putting these teaching plans into action. Geographer Trevor Paglen (2015) writes about the importance of engaging in experimental geography, which means "practices that take on the production of space in a self-reflexive way, practices that recognize that cultural production and production of space cannot be separated

from each other, and that cultural and intellectual production is a spatial practice". He writes, "The task of experimental geography, then, is to seize the opportunities that present themselves in the spatial practices of culture. To move beyond critical reflection, critique alone, and political "attitudes," into the realm of practice. To experiment with creating new spaces, new ways of being" (Paglen, 2015). The teaching element of my practice based research moved beyond critique and reflection of others' classes towards creating a class of my own, as I explore in chapter 6. I produced a new space of Irish dance and new ways of acting in this space.

I wanted to teach this alternative dance class to primary school children who have not been introduced to Irish dance before in order to replicate the tradition of teaching Irish dance to young children, but in this case to explore how it may be possible to foster the creativity that is not encouraged in traditional classes. In order to undertake this strand of my research, I contacted local primary schools near my home in North London about offering a free after school Irish dance class once a week for a term, from September to December 2017. I felt that offering the class through a school would enable me to easily promote this class to potential class attendees, which would be the students at the school. Holding it at a school provided me with a space to run the class, and this space would be easier for school children to go to than a space outside of their school. It also allowed me to undertake the class with the permission of the school, be subject to their child protection measures, be covered by the school's insurance, and gain appropriate informed consent from parents, carers and the children. These were important considerations in regards to conducting this research ethically, as was the students' experience of the class. This research received ethical approval and it was important to ensure that ethical questions were attended to.

In order to present myself as qualified for teaching this class, I created a CV including my dance training and competitive background, listing my awards as a Champion Irish dancer. In preparation for teaching, in addition to reading material that covered best practice of teaching dance to children, I researched dance games and activities that I could use to engage the children. I established a class plan for the semester which took all of this research into consideration. It included what we would cover in each class: the warm up, basic movements, dances, games, and the cool down. I wanted to repeat the movements and dances throughout the semester ensuring the students learnt and could

execute them well. I also wanted to introduce new movements and dances as the students progressed. When sending out material to the potential students and their parents, I included a description of my Irish dance class. I described how it was being used for my research to explore how an Irish dance class could incorporate a proper warm up and cool down, traditional step and time for the children to improvise and express themselves creatively. I also included consent forms for parents/ guardians and the children themselves.

I emailed and phoned nine local primary schools about running an Irish dance class, and a local Catholic school where the principal was Irish agreed to have me run the class. It is possible that our shared Irishness meant he felt more willing to assist me and let me run the class. It was a surprise that it was not too difficult to find a school that would agree to this. I anticipated that there would likely be challenges in terms of teaching the class. Though I had attended many, many classes, I had never taught a dance class before so that was going to be completely new to me. Indeed, as discussed in chapter 6, the teaching element of my research was very difficult. I struggled to manage the children and on some days which were particularly difficult, I left feeling very disheartened. However, on other days where everything went well, I felt very positive about the possibility of Irish dance being taught in more enjoyable and child centred manner, where creativity plays a significant role. I documented this teaching through research diary entries after each class to reflect on the challenges of teaching, how the teaching of traditional movement differs to the encouragement of creative improvisation, and how the use of both was received by the children.

Overall my practice based research in combination with interviews and viewing performances enabled a deep engagement with my subject. A lot of time was spent in practice-based research, so this was time consuming, and at times painful because of injuries. There were moments where the negative aspects of the practice and how it is taught affected me, but I really enjoyed returning to a practice that was such a significant part of my childhood. Because of my background in Irish dance I was able to connect and understand interviewees in a way that someone without that background would not have been able to. And being able to teach the practice myself enabled significant insight into the challenges and possibilities of teaching Irish dance in ways which foster expression and creativity as well as skill.

Chapter 4

Alternative forms of Irish dance: networks, motivations, definitions and debates

Introduction

This chapter explores alternative forms of Irish dance through a focus on the key choreographers, their networks, motivations and perspectives on key debates about how their work is defined in relation to traditional forms of Irish dance. Firstly, I explore the geographies of Irish dance innovation by identifying the choreographers involved in this movement and considering their relationships to each other, their career trajectories and the dance institutions that have been key to their work. This provides a foundation for addressing the ways the choreographers respond both to critical perspectives on Irish competitive and show dancing and their own sense of the limited and constraining nature of these dominant modes of Irish dancing. Two key issues of concern to them are the degree to which their work is judged to be skilled and the way in which Irish dance is usually associated with youth rather being a dance form that can continue to be practised in later life. The chapter then turns to consider the significant influence that contemporary dance has had on choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance. I explore the ways in which the choreographers understand their practice in relation to ideas of cultural fusion, define themselves in relation to ideas of tradition and artistic creativity, and consider the significance of ethnic origins in relation to skill and ability. The chapter thus seeks to address the questions of: Who are the key choreographers and dancers that are developing alternative forms of Irish dance, where are they located, how are they linked to each other, and what is their relation to the major Irish dance organisations and institutions? What has motivated them to develop new forms of Irish dance? How do they define their work in relation to ideas of tradition, authenticity and cultural mixing or 'fusion' and ethnic origins?

Geographies of Alternative Forms of Irish Dance

A first step in exploring the geographies of alternative forms of Irish dance was identifying key choreographers. This section considers the professional networks of these choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance, locating these key figures and their connections in terms of where they are from, and where they have trained, studied, performed, and taught various forms of Irish dance. There is a particular geography to

these networks. The choreographers mostly live and work across the United Kingdom, Ireland and the United States and are linked through specific sites of dance training. Before considering this through their accounts of their connections to each other, I set out short dance biographies for each:

Colin Dunne is a leading figure in the world of Irish dance. He grew up in England to Irish parents, and competed in Irish dance from a young age. He won his first World Championships, the biggest competition in the Irish dance calendar, at the age of 9. He was the first dancer ever to win the World, All Ireland and All England titles in the same year. When he finished his competitive career, he had won the World Championships nine times, the All Ireland's nine times, the Great Britain's eleven times and the All England's eight times. After retiring from competitive dancing, Colin began to work as a professional Irish dance performer. In October 1995, he began working with *Riverdance*, choreographing and performing a piece in the main show. When Michael Flatley pulled out the day before the re-opening of the show in London, Colin took on the principal role, which he had for over three years. As lead male, he danced with another leading figure in the Irish dance world, Jean Butler.

Jean Butler was born in New York to an Irish mother. She competed in Irish dance from the age of 9, taking part in regional, national and international championships. In 1994, she was the lead female in *Riverdance's* debut performance during the intermission of the Eurovision Song Contest. She went on to perform in the full length show as it toured around the world with lead Michael Flatley, and later Colin Dunne, when the former left. In 1998, both Jean and Colin worked together to create and star in the show, *Dancing on Dangerous Ground*. Both of these dancers were invited to be dancers in residence at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick, where they studied contemporary dance. Their time at the university significantly affected how they later approached their own personal Irish dance practice.

Breandán de Gallaí is another leading figure from the world of Irish dance. He grew up in Ireland, Irish danced and was incredibly successful in the competition circuit, often recognized for being innovative with his choreography. As a young dancer, he also went to Chicago for a year and studied ballet, tap, modern dance and jazz. He too was a dancer for *Riverdance*, performing at the Eurovision Song Contest, and dancing with the

company all over the world for over 9 years, and as the lead dancer for seven of those years. Like the other choreographers, he spent time studying at Limerick. In 2013, he completed a performance-based doctorate at the University of Limerick, exploring how Irish dance could evoke emotion and meaning. He and Colin continue to return to the University of Limerick to teach on the Irish dance courses.

Kristyn Fontanella is an American who is now based in Ireland. She competed in the United States, and later danced professionally and toured the world in shows including *Lord of the Dance* and *Riverdance*. Like Jean and Colin, Kristyn also undertook a masters degree in contemporary dance at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick and she is now a tutor on the BA and MA courses there. In 2014 she won the opportunity to have a mentored residency with Colin Dunne, who guided her in her creation of a new performance piece. More recently, she has worked with Jean Butler on one of Jean's performances. She has also worked with Chris Naish, another key figure of alternative forms of Irish dance, who is described more below.

Kieran Jordan is an American who is based in Boston but lived and trained in Ireland, while studying for her Masters in Contemporary Dance Performance at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, and prior to that. Kieran's dancing "reflects her broad interests and experience, ranging from traditional Irish dance to contemporary modern dance. She has a particular passion for sean-nos dance - the improvised 'old-style' tradition from Ireland - and through her innovative recordings, teaching programs and performance projects, she has played a major role in introducing it to the US" (Jordan, 2016a).

Suzanne Cleary and **Peter Harding** of *Up & Over It* also danced in *Riverdance* for several years. Suzanne grew up competing in Ireland and holds a World Championship title, while Peter grew up in Wales, where he trained in tap, ballet and Irish dance, and was a successful competitive dancer. They premiered as the new performance group, *Up & Over It*, at the Edinburgh Fringe show in 2009, after feeling as though they had outgrown the norms of the professional Irish dance shows. They describe themselves as "stretching the concept of Irish dance to its limits, we mix it up with electro-pop, nouveau folk, alternative percussion, experimental video, contemporary dance and cabaret" (Up & Over It, 2016a). Peter is based in London and Suzanne does not have a

permanent base at the moment but moves around Europe. The two often perform internationally, sometimes doing shows that last for a few weeks or months. Peter is close friends with Breandán.

Breandán is also friends with **Darrah Carr**, an American based in New York. Darrah grew up competing in Irish dance and doing ballet. When she went to university, she studied modern dance, which opened up her eyes to new ways of moving. She describes her movement now as ModERIN, "a playful combination of the words modern (dance) and ERIN (an Irish American reference to Ireland)" (Darrah Carr Dance, 2016a). She writes, "I source from two genres- traditional Irish step and contemporary modern dance. I feel two pulls – one toward tradition and another toward innovation – and seek to create dance in the space between" (Darrah Carr Dance, 2016b). She started her dance company, Darrah Carr Dance, in 1998 which holds performances throughout the United States. Darrah completed a PhD in 2017 entitled: *On the heels of Riverdance: Choreographic Process in Contemporary Irish Step Dance*, taking into consideration the work of her own dance company and the work of Breandán's.

Maire Clerkin was born in London to Irish parents, but currently lives in California. When she was living in London, she travelled to teach at the University of Limerick on the masters in Irish Dance Studies. Her expertise is in theater and Irish dance, and this is what she taught. She also taught at Blas, the summer school course in Irish dance and music at the University of Limerick on the recommendation of Colin Dunne in 2013 and 2016. Her work often incorporates theater and comedy, exploring the norms of Irish dance and how the practice has affected her life.

Nic Gareiss is an American dancer who draws from various percussive traditions to create a movement practice that seems unique to him alone. He is most strongly influenced by Appalachian clogging, Quebec step dance and Irish step dancing. Nic studied for a semester abroad during his undergraduate degree in Anthropology and Music at Central Michigan University. He later returned to the University of Limerick to do a masters in Ethnochoreology. During his Masters, Nic trained had individual training with Colin Dunne every week for a semester. In 2016, he did a residency with Colin Dunne at the Irish Arts Center in New York. In the same year, Jean invited him to

perform for and meet with her students on the Irish Studies course at New York University.

Leighann Kowalsky is an American choreographer, performer and teacher in Irish dance and modern dance in New York. She trained in modern dance alongside her Irish dance practice from a young age and has never competed in Irish dance. When she was young, she did workshops with Jean Butler, through the Irish dance school where she was training. Leighann's Irish dance teacher trained in the same competitive dance school as Jean Butler. Leighann and her dancers have performed at the New York City Irish Dance Festival multiple times in the past ten years where Darrah Carr's dance company also performs.

Erin Hayes and **Andrew Vickers** started the non-competitive Irish dance school, Club Rince in New Jersey in 2015. Erin began Irish dancing at the age of five in the United States and competed at the World Championships in 2002 and 2003. She undertook a Masters in Dance Science at Trinity Laban from 2011 - 2012 and strongly advocates for the consideration of safety in Irish dance practice. Andrew Vickers began Irish dancing at the age of nine in Ireland and started dancing professionally at the age of 15. He has performed and created choreography for several smaller professional Irish Dance shows, and created his own, *Imagine Ireland: The Show*. He also undertook the Masters in Traditional Irish Dance Performance at the University of Limerick.

Chris Naish is a choreographer, performer and teacher from England, who began competing at the age of 4. He danced professionally with *Lord of the Dance* and *Riverdance* for several years. In 2013, he founded Fusion Fighters, an Irish dance performance group, and in 2016 he established the Fusion Dance Fest, a week long Irish dance course exploring various styles and culminating in a performance in Limerick, Ireland. The Fusion Fighters' performance style involves incorporating body percussion and a variety of specific and more freeing arm movements with Irish dance. They teach others their style during workshops and their Instagram account encourages young dancers around the world to create videos to send them. Fusion Fighters have a growing online community of enthusiasts. Kristyn has worked with Chris on the Fusion Dance Fest, multiple times, where she teaches dancers a contemporary Irish dance piece.

As these dance biographies show, most of these choreographers have strong personal connections to each other: many are friends, or they know of each other through doing similar work. The networks involve the support of older generations of dancers for those that saw them in dance shows as children and teenagers. Kristyn, for example, talked of how she has worked with Colin and Jean, dancers she had watched in *Riverdance* when she was younger:

> For god's sake I've met Colin Dunne and Jean Butler, like I saw them on Radio City, like it's insane to me. And to think that they are supportive like 'yeah great question that keep going, come see what I'm doing', this that and the other, it's a lovely family of support of dance and all that. And it doesn't mean that everything is going to be wonderful (laughing) but it's very… very comforting.

Undoubtedly these connections affect the work choreographers produce. Nic, for example considered it important to be aware of what the other choreographers are doing and "celebrate what's going on". He shares news about percussive dance events on his website but does not feel pressure to do what others are doing. Instead he thinks "it's important to be aware of it and to create work in response to what's happening around you. You can't do it in a vacuum, that feels like a waste of time."

As is evident through tracing the choreographers' connections, and places of training and teaching, the University of Limerick has been a significant place for the development of new forms of Irish dance. Catherine Foley started the first, and still the only, Masters course in Irish Dance Performance in the world at the university, ensuring it became a site for thinking about, researching, and experimenting with Irish dance. Clearly, many of the choreographers have sought out Limerick as a place to explore their practice of Irish dance and to share their teachings with other students. Indeed, many of these innovative choreographers of Irish dance have trained at the University of Limerick and have been strongly affected by their training there. Colin Dunne, Jean Butler, Kieran Jordan and Kristyn Fontanella all undertook the contemporary dance Masters at Limerick, while Breandán De Gallaí did a PhD there on Irish dance, and Nick Gareiss studied ethnochoreology.

The Masters in Dance Performance was set up at the University of Limerick in 1999. There are two streams, one is Contemporary Dance Performance and the other is Irish Dance Performance, which Catherine Foley was responsible for designing. She has a background as a dancer and a musician, and in 1988 she completed the first PhD ever undertaken on Irish dance in which she created Laban notation for Irish dance, all of which has affected how she designed the course. Performing is key to her engagement with Irish dance. As she comments, though a lot of emphasis had been, and often still is, on competition Irish Dance, she loved performing:

> in pubs, in sessions, I loved performing on stage with music groups, that's what I did. I would have been what you call a flexible dancer, and I loved the music and I would respond to that music in the way that I saw fit for that particular context at the time and many of the dancers I knew didn't do that, a lot of the dancers competed and you know that was the end of their performance and I felt it was kind of a shame in some ways.

The Masters in Irish dance performance was thus established to explore Irish dance beyond the competition space. Catherine wants dancers to know the other traditions of Irish dance such as sean nós and set dancing, the history of the dance, how to warm up and cool down, research skills, how to be "advanced skilled dancers of the moment, know what there is to know, but equally into the future, they had to be able to choreograph". As she explained it was more about creating a thinking and creative, knowledgeable individual who was a dancer and who had archival knowledge as well and who knew their body and who knew the tradition out of which they had come. For Catherine it seemed clear that she wants dancers to have a wealth of knowledge beyond how to dance at a high level. She wants dancers to have a full understanding of their dance form, how it had begun, how it was danced in various places from its early days and how it has transformed throughout the years. She wants dancers to have a wide range of academic knowledge of Irish dance and she also wants them to have a business understanding of the dance world, and how to succeed in this world.

In terms of choreography and making dances, Catherine has dancers on the MA in traditional Irish dance performance learning choreographic principles from

contemporary dance so they can develop Irish dance in a different way to *Riverdance* and in a different way to competitive dance culture. She wants to help them create what they want to create and have it be true to them, and not be restricted by these already established norms, thus like the Sibelius Academy's radical folk music department in Juniper Hill's work (2009), her course gives students the freedom to create their own original work. She explained that the dancers were not assessed just on technique but on choreography or what they were trying to communicate to the audience, so that their creativity would not be stifled by having to meet assessment requirements on technique. And, as Catherine explained, they may be purposely dancing in a way that doesn't adhere to the proper technique. That might be the purpose of their piece, to challenge those norms. Catherine spoke of dancers creating solos where they were literally in a cardboard box, which symbolized how they sometimes feel restricted and 'boxed in' by the tradition. Coming from a background in theatre, Catherine is eager to see people create work that tells a story or expresses a feeling and moved her as the audience.

Catherine's knowledge and thoughts on Irish dance have definitely affected those who have studied at the University and what they created. They would most certainly be aware of her views on how the dance form is progressing and how it could progress. However as she mentioned, "each individual is different and their response is different". Some may take the course and then return to competitive dance, some may do both at the same time, creating work and competing, and some may not want to return to competing after having their eyes opened up to new ways of dancing.

For many, the course is a way to give them confidence to explore and create different types of Irish dance performances. For Catherine the course enables them to feel that they can play and create outside the 'box'. She also felt it gave them the freedom to try something new and receive feedback from the staff who have an understanding of what the dancers are trying to achieve. Likewise, the Irish dancers who choose to take the contemporary dance course at Limerick are doing so to gain the confidence to move their dancing into another realm outside of competition and the standard show dancing.

The University, particularly Catherine Foley, has certainly promoted and supported experimentation in Irish dance. Many dancers would find it difficult to experiment without the encouragement they find in this space. Indeed, in competitive Irish dance

dancers are mostly encouraged to dance to the standard of competition dance and not diverge from this, as it could result in the dancer not placing well, meaning they don't win or come in 2nd or 3rd place (or whatever place they were aiming for). Then when dancers leave the competition world for employment in Irish dance performances, such as *Riverdance*, they are then encouraged to dance in the show style of Irish dance. These norms certainly do not leave a great deal of room for creativity. In contrast Nic describes the university as a space conducive to experimentation:

> What I think is unique about Limerick is it's an incredibly stimulating environment to be in. It's a laboratory of experimentation where research and practice are collapsed into one thing. That's a really exciting proposition for me to be in a place where you read and write and move.

The University of Limerick is also significant for its recognition of Irish dance as a form that deserves to be included among others in high level professional dance education and scholarship. Kieran argued that Irish dance isn't usually validated in academia. "It's very much the case in the US that Irish dance is not considered one of the academic, you know in most MFA programmes here there's ballet, modern and then there's African dance, even Flamenco, Indian classical dance, but you never, almost never see Irish dance validated in that way." Therefore, she argues, dancers who train in contemporary dance, in addition to Irish, are likely to have more opportunities for getting grants or being part of showcases because contemporary dance is validated in this way. Thus the opportunity to study at a university where Irish dance is taken seriously and valued is clearly important to these experimental Irish dance choreographers.

The opportunity for the choreographers to connect with each other at the university, and consider some common questions or issues, at the same time and place, is also significant. As Kieran reflected:

> When I was at UL, Jean Butler and Colin were both there. Colin was doing some teaching and Jean was in my class, although she was in her second year and most of us were doing one year but she did a second year. So that was very interesting, like I didn't know either of

> them personally until that time and yeah it was interesting to see all of us kind of experimenting and definitely taking it in different ways but I think feeling some of the same struggles you know.

While Kieran, Jean, Colin and Kristyn all took the contemporary dance Masters, many students exploring Irish dance at Limerick take the traditional Irish dance performance masters. Thus those who are on different courses are often both exploring new form of Irish dance practice, some from a contemporary dance perspective and some from an Irish dance perspective, with encouragement from tutors to expand beyond the traditional norms. But there is something unique about the contemporary dance course at Limerick and how it has drawn Irish dancers. They could have studied contemporary dance anywhere in the world but they chose to do it at the University of Limerick, because of its close connection to the Irish dance studies programme, and because their own achievements in competitive Irish dance would be recognised there, but would be unlikely to be known or appreciated at other dance institutions.

Outside of the university, several of the choreographers have connections with Dance Limerick, a support and development organization funded by the Irish Arts Council and Limerick City Council, that "promotes, supports and celebrates dance creation, presentation and participation" (Dance Limerick, 2019). This is a place that provides choreographers with residency opportunities and a space to perform; there are also dance classes for the public. Kristyn, in particular commented on how much Dance Limerick supports her, and she, Breandán and Colin have all done residencies there, spent time creating works and performed them in that space. Thus Dance Limerick is clearly a space that is important to these choreographers, where their new works of Irish dance are created and shared. As Somdahl- Sands (2008: 330) argues: "Art gains meaning through the nexus created by how the work is presented, the prevailing discourses about art and the interpretive presence of viewers. The meaning of art therefore changes in various contexts." Clearly Dance Limerick provides a context where experimentation with Irish dance is approved of, where the works can be seen as art, not just entertainment, and where the audience likely expects this, and does not expect the spectacle and glitz of *Riverdance*.

Limerick has certainly been a significant place for many of the choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance. It has been a place of study for many, where they have explored new ways of doing Irish dance, challenged and questioned themselves and their dance form. They have connected with each other in Limerick, often working together, and learning from each other. They have performed here, sharing their new forms of Irish dance with audiences. And many have taught at the university, sharing new ways of doing Irish dance with students. Limerick is thus a key node in the geographies of alternative forms of Irish dance. The dancers who teach, learn, collaborate and perform there work against negative perceptions of the value of Irish dance relative to other dance forms.

Negative Perceptions of Irish dance

Though *Riverdance,* and the Irish dance shows that followed, dramatically popularised Irish dance, those who are engaging creatively with the dance form often work against both the impacts of this popularity and against the contemporary culture of competitive Irish dance. The public's perception of Irish dance is not always positive, and these negative views have certainly affected innovative Irish dancers, and are arguably part of the reason why they have decided to explore Irish dance in ways which challenge these attitudes. This section explores the choreographers' reflection on these negative perspectives of Irish dance.

For some of the choreographers, calling their work 'Irish dance' or describing performances as an Irish dance show meant they had to battle negative perceptions of Irish dance. Peter, for example, recounted calling up theatres to see if they would take on his show, but when he said Irish dance they would "shut it down because they have this image of this cheap Irish dance show" and thus he felt that being Irish dancers "harmed us more than it did us good". Similarly when Colin described himself was an Irish dancer with a solo show he initially found it difficult to get the attention of those who present contemporary dance work, as if an Irish dance solo show of artistic merit "was just maybe a little bit difficult in their head to imagine". At the same time, the assumed appeal of the dominant images of show dances as well as the dress and styling of competitive dance mean that some venue programmers do not book in performances that do to fit what are thought to be public expectations. As Kieran Jordan explained, "I've had so many experiences over the years where my work doesn't fit into the showy

performative what people expect out of post-Riverdance Irish dance. My costuming is never dresses and curls, so I don't fit any of those formats and I'm sure I've lost lots of gigs over the years because of that but you kind of get used to being on your own island I guess (laughing)." However for all of these choreographers, once they had established themselves and what they do, it became easier for them to secure venues for performances.

Leighan, who is trained in both Irish dance and contemporary dance, often performs mixed Irish and contemporary dances, or strictly contemporary dances. She discussed how her work was viewed differently depending the platform within which she was performing:

> Often if we say we're doing Irish dance we're not taken seriously on the platform that is dance as art or contemporary dance. If it's any sort of cultural function like they love the Irish, because they're looking for a widespread thing but we have found that we have to subdue the Irish part within the contemporary or even wider art dance world because of the negative stigma that's around it, we've absolutely found that but what we've also found is that then when we perform people come up to us and they're like what was that? That was awesome and that's where we get to say, 'that was Irish dance!' So yes we definitely have trouble finding performance platforms that are accepting of Irish dance yeah.

Leighann thinks people can be interested in and appreciate Irish dance when they don't realize that that's what they're seeing. This suggests that people are likely to value Irish dance more if not put off by negative representations in the media and when they see it presented as Leighann does, without wigs and the dresses and thus not looking like competitive Irish dance or *Riverdance*. Indeed she went on to describe a time where she was setting choreography for another dance company, and they asked her about a turn that they found unfamiliar, and she said she realized it was an Irish dance turn. She felt that having Irish dance training means she can move her body in ways unfamiliar to contemporary dancers, and she said it was "kind of fun to see them struggle with that and

I think it's cool to see that happen because Irish dance is often the underdog." As she went on to say:

> But then if you take it out of context of what everybody thinks of Irish dance with the huge wigs and the competition dresses and I give them a turn that's an Irish turn set in the context of all this contemporary they're like 'oh wow that's beautiful' you know and it's really nice to see that happening a little bit, you know if you really tear off the social constructs that have surrounded Irish dance, it's like exciting.

The media often presents Irish dance as an oddity, or a strange element of popular culture. Photojournalists regularly cover the World Championships and photo stories on newspapers like *The Guardian* present the costumes, wigs, fake tan, and overall look of the dance form, as an exotic and curious fringe culture. Accounts of the emergence of *Riverdance* in the media can produce a highly simplified and limited account of the development of Irish dance and the nature of contemporary Irish dance. Colin Dunne recalled seeing an interview with Michael Flatley about *Riverdance*, "and it was all you know how sexy Riverdance was, and he was, and how brilliant it was compared to how Irish dancing used to be and this piece of footage by John Kineely was trailed out as if to say it used to be really old and kind of stupid, and ridiculous." Colin was annoyed as "it implied that there had been nothing in between, it was just this silly old folk thing and now it was super sexy". Choreographers thus work in a context in which their work is evaluated in relation to both expectations that it fit public perceptions of Irish show and competitive dance and critical public and professional dance appraisals of the limits of these versions of Irish dance. However choreographers are also addressing what they feel are the problems of both competitive and show forms of Irish dance. This is the focus of the next section.

Why change Irish dance?

As noted in the previous section, Irish dance is both a popular cultural practice for dancers and their audiences but is also dismissed by others for whom it is judged to be a folk, traditional and national dance form that does not have the artistic quality as other forms of dance, such as ballet and contemporary dance, which are seen as high art.

Audiences, theatres, academic institutions, the media and other dancers often view it as artistically limited. Innovative Irish dance choreographers work to challenge these perspectives. Yet, many also feel that competitive Irish dance is limited in terms of being an expressive dance form. The sole focus of the dance form is traditionally on the steps and performing them accurately, meaning there is not usually any emphasis on expression or storytelling. Kieran reflected on this:

> Like to just do your jigs and reels, it does kind of reach a point of limitation if you're trying to express conflict or storytelling or a message or whatever, so I think that's kind of one avenue that drives people is the idea of creating narrative out of dance and just realizing that the whole body can get involved and you can experiment with silence or music or different methods for choreographing.

Similarly Colin Dunne reflected on seeing solo contemporary dance shows in New York and being "envious and curious" about how they moved and affected him as an audience member in a way that he felt Irish dance in its traditional sense could not. Many of the choreographers felt that they were at a stage of their lives when they wanted to do more than just execute a dance well. Many wanted to tell a story, or explore an issue, or move their audience in a deeper way. Catherine considered this:

> They're trying to create, choreograph work that is expressing something of themselves and I think it goes back to individual expression and individual communication, being able to say something through dance, that is the only way you can say it and no words will say it for you, you can only do it by going through this whole process of creating the dance, pain and all, and whatever else comes out of it. But yeah I think that's why they do it. And it's the artistry, to be an artist as well, to be an artist as a dancer, that's important.

The question of whether or not the dancer is an artist is clearly an important issue for these choreographers. Most competitive dancers and dancers in traditional Irish dance shows are unlikely to consider themselves artists. This is because the dance form is

usually not considered 'art'; it is usually considered a highly skilled practice of a traditional dance form whether on the competitive or show stage. Irish dancers, who are working in the contemporary arena and borrowing concepts from contemporary dance, do so partly so that they and their dance form are taken more seriously and seen to be 'art' (Ni Bhriain 2013). Peter agreed, "Yes, absolutely yeah. I mean it's just making it relevant, and take it out of that heritage aspect and more into the contemporary art world, you know that contemporary landscape." However, Colin argued that he's not trying to change Irish dance: "I'm not trying to do anything with Irish dance, I'm just trying to do something with my dance, which happens to be Irish dance. So yeah it's not about trying to make Irish dance this, that or the other." Colin practices, performs and teaches Irish dance so differently now, that it is interesting he says he's not trying to change Irish dance. Perhaps he does not want to be responsible for calls to change the style, and would rather be viewed as an artist who is creating with his medium. But, by seeking to be seen as an artist, he is certainly seeking to be seen as differently to how Irish dancers have been seen up until this point.

But does the contemporary dance world accept Irish dance as an artistic dance form? Breandán felt that others in the dance world say Irish dance is just about virtuosity or technicality of movement and nothing more. Likewise Nic considered the contemporary dance world's reaction to the work on innovative Irish dance choreographers: "It will be interesting to get people in the United States, especially *dance* people, capital D dance people to think about Irish dancing you know as an art form that's worthy of the contemporary art world." Nic felt that Colin's work had achieved this and Jean was trying to do this. However he did not feel interested in making his own work a part of the contemporary dance world which he felt had its own "hang ups". He reflected:

> So I'm very happy to kind of exist in this, as you said in this fringey, niche space and that to me feels like a very happy space to be because it means that I don't have to do the Folgers coffee commercial, which you know like Cara Butler did, it also means that I don't have to do some kind of avant thing where I'm pouring a glass of water on myself while I'm dancing hornpipe, you know I don't need to do things that are going to appeal to certain camps, I can do what artistically appeals to me and what feels good for my body.

Indeed, Nic is a very unique case in comparison to the other choreographers. He had trained as a younger dancer in a range of styles and was very welcomed in various dance genres. He recognized the difficulty of other choreographers who had grown up in the competitive and show world of Irish dance, become famous for excelling in that style and then decide to do something completely different and new in front of their peers, former teachers and "fans" of their dancing. For those choreographers who are doing something new with Irish dance it is arguable that they are appealing to whatever "camp" they are trying to be a part of, indeed Breandán felt that Colin was trying to appeal to the contemporary dance world. However, perhaps these choreographers are creating their own world of contemporary Irish dance, where they will establish new norms of skill and credibility which others who come after them will seek to match with a similar line of work.

While there are several choreographers creating new forms of Irish dance, these cannot be said to all fall within the same genre. Catherine Foley expanded upon this:

> Well it depends on the function of the context, some people want to entertain, some people do not want to entertain, some people see themselves as I say as maybe artists and some people say I'm an artist but I'm also an entertainer, and some people say well I'm an entertainer and other people are saying who cares really (laughing). But there is that going on as well I think. If you see yourself as an artist, you take yourself seriously as an artist then you create work that's regarded by those in the know, that is considered to be art. And I think a lot of people today if they're trying to create a *work*, you know a lot of them want it to be seen as art, while there are other people creating work that really want to make some money out of it because it's about earning a living. So some people don't have to earn a living on their own just by being an artist, some people do, so it depends on circumstances, and people adapt their lives to suit those circumstances, but I think people who are creating work, it's wonderful to see the new work being done.

Thus the need to make money can affect whether or not choreographers and dancers choose to produce work that is 'art'. Indeed, artistic pieces may not draw as wide an audience as commercial pieces, and therefore not make a choreographer as much money as a more commercial or entertaining piece. Thus perhaps there are dancers who wish to create more artistic or challenging pieces but they cannot afford to do so. Others wish to create 'art' that is challenging and explores issues within it, but still want to entertain and impress their audience. For others, it seems clear that they do not want to simply entertain but really want to challenge an audience. Thus for Irish dance choreographers there can be a multitude of reasons that they are changing Irish dance and are producing the work that they are.

This includes personal issues of embodiment. Kieran discussed how she felt traditional competitive Irish dance suited bodies of a certain shape, and she didn't feel that her body was suited to it, but she found it was perfect for sean nós and contemporary dance. She explained:

> I also felt like at a certain point that I didn't have the right body for it, like I'm very short, I'm 5' 1 and like at a certain point it seemed like all the girls were close to 6 ft tall with these really long legs and you know I just felt kind of compact and stumpy like I couldn't get the extension or cover the floor in the same way, but when I started doing sean nós, that was like oh this is perfect, because I'm compact and I can really get right down into the floor and it really spoke to my physicality and old style step dancing also, I really felt like this is how my body wants to move… when I started doing release technique kind of movement in contemporary, again very grounded and very like released and weighty and I felt great, so I think some of my choreography choices just naturally come out of the type of movement that fits on myself as a mover.

There are clearly many reasons for why choreographers are changing Irish dance, whether it is as a response to negative notions about Irish dance in certain arenas, or to make it a more expressive dance form, or for it to be seen as art, or for themselves to be

seen as artists, or so that it better suits the dancer's body, the reasons are individual but also strongly influenced by wider society and the Irish dance world.

The question of skill

Competitive Irish dance is a dance form that is judged entirely on skill. Dancers are not evaluated on how they tell a story or express emotion; they are purely judged on their ability to execute the dance. In many ways choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance are going against this. They are often seeking to express something through their dance, or to be seen as more than just skilled. Yet almost all of them have been trained and conditioned for many, many years to appreciate skill, and to have a deep personal desire to appear skilled in their practice. Skill was an issue that was talked about in various ways by these choreographers, reflecting on its importance to them, but also moving beyond the dominant emphasis on skill alone.

Within competition dance, dancers may be judged on moving gracefully, having sharp movements, getting good height in their jumps, executing difficult movements well and dancing with feet overcrossed. Having the feet overcrossed means the legs are crossed at the thighs, so if the right foot is in front then the right knee is visible but ideally the left knee isn't, as it is behind the right. Then both feet are visible as the right foot is far to the left and the left foot is far to the right. This is quite difficult to execute for an entire dance, it is much easier to cross the legs but have the knees more separate, and the right foot just in front of the left. Overcrossing has become a trend and 'desirable' in the last 25 years or so. Despite often disliking aspects of the competition world, many of the choreographers felt that competition made you a skilled dancer. They believed that without competitions, dancers would not be as skilled. As Nic commented, "Yeah of course the competitive scene does create a razor sharp precedent for technique, an Olympian standard." Similarly, Peter reflected on how Irish dance is advanced in comparison to other folk dances because of the overwhelming focus on competition. He argued that Irish dancers have been constantly pushing the boundaries to improve it and make it more challenging, because of competitions. Like competition, Irish dance shows, such as *Riverdance* or *Lord of the Dance*, are also based on skill. There may be a story that is told through the performance but this is not the priority.

Skill in Irish dance is a very contentious issue for innovative Irish dance choreographers. At one moment they may criticize the lack of skill of certain dancers and at the next moment, they may argue that skill is not important. It seems clear that the need to appear to be a highly skilled dancer is a feeling that they struggle to break away from. For some, even though they may want to do new and different things with Irish dance, they often still want to appear skilled within the traditional Irish dance realm. Indeed, Breandán's performances appear highly skilled according to Irish dance norms. He talked to me of his love for the virtuosity of the dance form, and clearly wants to be recognized as a highly skilled dancer. While he wants the dance form to be expressive, and be more than just skill, he also wants to still dance at a high level according to traditional Irish dance norms.

Peter also seemed somewhat conflicted by the notion of skill and commented that other Irish dance companies are trying to emulate a new show, *Prodijig*, but that they don't have the skill to do it well enough. *Prodijig* is an Irish dance company created by former *Riverdance* lead, Alan Kenefick. He and his group competed and won the British talent show, *Got to Dance*, in 2011. On *Got to Dance*, they impressed the judges and audiences with fast footwork and sharp arm movements. The groups seemed to draw on hip hop and street dance, there was a lot of attitude, a rigid and hyper masculine style of movement from both the men and women dancers, and costumes of trousers and tops that were gender neutral and appeared quite futuristic. Alan then created his show *Prodijig: The Revolution* which premiered in Cork in 2016. Since so many mainstream shows are based just on skill, Peter argues that they then don't have a deeper meaning, so they are easy to understand, and then others want to replicate them. However he felt that these replicas did not have the quality, in terms of skill, of the original show. Yet, Peter also argued that quality of dancing didn't matter if people were trying to create something original. He said:

> But I think anyone that is trying to do work on their own or with a small group of people pushing their bodies in Irish dancing into different realms and not pretending to be anything else but themselves, there's a place for everybody, it doesn't matter what the quality of the dancing is like. Or you know if you're trying to make a cheap version of *Lord of the Dance* or *Magic of the Dance* or *Prodijig*, then

> you're going to fail and it's just going to look awful but if you're fresh out of competing at the World Championships or straight out of university and trying to create work on your own or with people, then there's a place for you and I think that's a good thing.

It seems overwhelmingly apparent that skill is of the utmost importance to those who Irish dance, thus it is interesting that Peter argued that skill did not matter if dancers were seeking to experiment, or create unique, authentic work. Perhaps he was trying to be more diplomatic, or fair by stating that the quality of the dancing did not matter. On the other hand, Maire, whose performance group, *The Hairy Marys,* brought awareness to questionable Irish dance norms through humour and provocation, argued that the dancers in her group were able to do this because they were already so skilled at the dance form. As she explained:

> It was provocative but then Nel McAferty the writer said, she saw us at some fundraiser and she wrote in a book, it's called *Women in Focus* and there were a few purists who said you know these English women are taking the piss out of Irish dancing. And she said it's the fact that they're so good at dancing you see, you know we had Mary Cosgrave who was twice All Ireland champion, I wasn't a bad dancer myself you know it's like we had good dancers in the group and you can send it up if you can do it. You know if you can master the form, if you've been trained in it of course you can send it up because it's yours.

Indeed this seemed to support the notion that skill is the overriding importance within all forms of Irish dance. Marie felt they were taken seriously because their skill and talent as dancers was apparent, whereas if they were not so skilled, they may have been more seriously critiqued for making fun of Irish dance. In comparison, Breandán argued that he felt Colin Dunne doesn't want to be seen as just skilled. As he commented, many in the contemporary dance world would consider Irish dance a lesser dance form because it is all about skill and not about expressing emotion, telling a story or challenging people's thoughts and feelings. Breandán felt that Colin was seeking to perform in the contemporary arena, so that his work would be considered more in this style. Indeed, I

would argue that not just Colin, but many of the choreographers who are exploring new ways to perform Irish dance are at least partly doing so to be seen as being more than just skilled, to express thoughts and feelings, and to be addressing social issues through their work.

In a differing view, Leighann who had trained in both contemporary and Irish dance, but never competed in the practice, seemed to view Irish dancers in general as not very skilled. She felt that Irish dancers were not judged to be on the same level as contemporary dancers within the dance world, because in her opinion they cannot dance at the same standard as contemporary dancers, unless in competitive settings. She recounted a story of how she filled in in a small Irish dance show once and how she felt the dancers had a lazy attitude towards performance in contrast to competing. She said they had a lot of choreography to learn in a short time and she learnt it all properly but that many of the other dancers were making errors when rehearsing their steps. In response to this, the director of the show told them not to worry, just keep moving, and that the audience is going to be too distracted by the costumes and the stage to notice the feet properly. Leighann felt like Irish dance was not held to the same standards as contemporary dance and that it was terrible that Irish dancers could get up and 'mess up' in a performance and this was seen as acceptable. As I noted in my research diary during a research trip to visit Leighann at her dance school in upstate New York: "I feel like she had a strange view of Irish dancers though because from what I know, within the competitive world and show world precision is key, and would be drilled into dancers. It wouldn't be acceptable for them to be messing up." Yet her account suggests that the quality of performance in Irish dance shows is taken less seriously by some teachers and thus their dancers.

It seemed that Leighann held contradictory ideas about Irish dancers' skill. At one point during rehearsals for the Irish dance festival that she and her dancers were performing in, she said to her boyfriend that the piece was being performed at a festival where there would be Irish dancers in the audience, so it needed to be good because they would know what her dancers were doing. She then turned to me and asked if it looked good. Thus here she was recognizing that Irish dancers would have knowledge of Irish dance technique and know whether her dancers were dancing well, in comparison to an audience of contemporary dancers, who wouldn't know whether or not Leighann's

dancers had good Irish dance technique. However at another point, she pointed to her dancers' skill again. I said to her I noticed her dancers dancing in parallel as well as with feet turned out. Having the feet turned out is the norm in competitive Irish dance and feet are never in parallel, but this is something that may sometimes occur in shows as a stylistic choice. She said that her dancers doing both parallel and turned out feet was a statement to Irish dancers that said: "look at us, we can dance with our feet parallel on purpose and turned out on purpose, we don't just end up with our feet in parallel accidentally". Thus she again emphasised the skill of her dancers in deliberately departing from the norm rather than doing so in error.

Individual choreographers and teachers also situate themselves and their dancers in relation to their own and other Irish dance teachers. Leighann, for example, felt that she outgrew the teaching at Solas an Lae, the dance school she was with as a child. She felt she knew more than her teacher, and needed to find others to learn from, so she began taking contemporary dance classes, thus emphasising that she became more skilled than her own teacher. She also spoke of an Irish dance teacher who visited them from Ireland when she was dancing at Solas an Lae and Leighann said she "whipped them into shape". She invited this teacher back when she started her own school, but this time she felt they had outgrown her, surpassed that teacher's knowledge, so this visit was more of a collaborative experience, where they were learning from each other. Her emphasis on being skilled may reflect the dominance of competitive success in proving skill. Not having a competition dance background may have affected how she feels about her skill in comparison to those who can say what their best placement has been. Or perhaps the need to prove her skill was from her feeling strongly that her contemporary background does makes her more skilled than other Irish dancers or from the wider attitude that ethnic dance forms are often seen as less skilled than other dance forms.

For some choreographers, the notion of 'skill', meaning dancing at the high level expected of competition or professional show dancers, seemed very important. If this was no longer their movement style, they had found new markers of skill within their new style, new expectations of how their movements should look, or how to do them 'well'. The norms of skill within Irish dance appear to be something they grapple with; wanting freedom from these norms, but wanting to be seen as skilled as they always were when dancing within that realm. Closely tied to the question of skill is the issue of age, as

young dancers are frequently the ones who are able to execute movements at the highly skilled level expected of them.

The issue of age

Within the realms of competition and show dance, Irish dance has been predominantly practised by children and young adults. Many would agree that the requirements of how the body has to move as an Irish dancer, mean that it is best suited to young people. Niall O'Leary, an Irish dance instructor who has been teaching for 25 years and has the largest school in New York City has said: "You could argue that championship step dancing is becoming a bit like gymnastics in that the top gymnasts are around thirteen or fourteen years of age, and I suppose people start losing their fitness at around seventeen or eighteen" (Moloney et al, 2009: 94) For Kristyn because of the way the dance form has evolved to the present day, "it's like they're ice skating on solid floor, so I would say yeah the 13 year olds probably are at the top of their game because for starters their bodies allow it". Dancers often finish competing around the age of 18 and then possibly dance professionally in a show until their mid 20s or 30s. So their 'career' as a performing dancer is very short. Age is an issue that was important to choreographers of new forms of Irish dance, who, often as older dancers, were going against the norm by performing at their age.

This is an issue addressed directly by some innovative dancers. Breandán de Gallaí's performance *Linger*, first performed in 2017 is a duet including himself as a 49 year old and a younger dancer who is in his 20s. One of the key themes that the show explores is ageing, as the audiences watch the younger man and the older man dance the same steps, and see how these are done differently. Breandán reflected on the importance of seeing older dancers on stage. However, when I saw the performance, there was very little difference between how Breandán and the younger man danced. Therefore rather than show a dancer who could no longer dance at a top level because of his age, instead it showed that he could still dance at a top level despite his age. Peter from *Up & Over It* also reflected on Breandán's performance:

> Yeah he told me when he was doing *Linger* that he was meant to show physically the fact that he's aged and the fact that he can't keep up. And before he did it I thought that was such a lovely idea, you know

> to see how that changes the quality of movement and then I watched it in Edinburgh and they were exactly the same, which obviously brings another dimension to it, but he was just flying around the place, like it was absolutely crazy.

As Peter continued: "It was unreal what he was doing, like I couldn't believe it, I was just shocked that he pushed himself that physically. And he said that originally he wasn't meant to do it, but then the competitiveness when he got in the room with that younger boy pushed him to do it and I was amazed." So though Breandán had intended to show how the body's abilities change through age, the norms of the practice shaped his performance. The norms of youth, extreme physical prowess and competition, clearly affected Breandán, leading him to work to perform at a much 'higher' level despite his age and his body's ability.

Other choreographers reflected on dancing in a way that was more appropriate for an older body. Kristyn argued that Irish dance was only suitable for young people, and how her current choreography is partly a result of reflecting on how to choreograph for an ageing body. As she explained: "And it's also part of the ageing process, you know like you can't get out there and do your Kilkenny Races [a traditional hard shoe dance] at age 35 [laughing] and I don't want to lose that area of my life, so how do I adapt the movement to my body that can do it now and I think that is a huge part of it." Colin also reflected on the limits of the ageing dancer's body, and of getting older and less physically capable:

> That's where, like it's a young man's kind of game really. So what you lose then in maybe speed or agility or robustness is where then your creative side kind of comes in or one of the other elements that you're working with. Or what kind of experience are you trying to create because the experience is not just about watch me dance and watch me do this move and this trick and that trick. It's not about tricks or just about a virtuosity or that traditional sense of virtuosity.

For some choreographers then it is clear that their new work recognizes that the norms of Irish dance performance are constructed to reflect the physical abilities of young dancers. Therefore they change the norms through dancing in a different way, a way that is more suitable to them at their age, and changing the purpose of the performance.

However there were also conflicted ideas around age and Irish dance. Peter didn't agree with the idea that choreographers were changing their style because of ageing and not being able to continue dancing as they were. As he argued: "No I think that's bullshit, because there's this myth that *Riverdance* is the hardest thing on the earth to perform and it's not. It's performed to a track, you get every other number off, you get one day off a week, you know it's not that difficult." Performing to a track means that the tap sounds of the hard shoe performances are pre-recorded and played during the show. So technically dancers don't have to work as hard to ensure that they make every required sound when performing, because the sounds will be playing. He went on to say:

> You know I think we tell people now that oh the reason we're sitting doing the hand dancing [sitting at a table with their hands on the table doing the steps that their feet would usually do] is because we're getting older and it is obviously, it's a lot easier than doing a full show but I think you can still, you know the show that we did at 30 and the quality of dancing and the fact that it was live and it was just the two of us for an hour was a lot more taxing than doing *Riverdance* you know. So I think if you have an idea in your head of what you want the piece to be, you will naturally push yourself to make that the best.

Thus Peter felt the need to defend innovative Irish dance choreographers against the notion that they may be creating work which is somehow 'easier'. I see value in Peter's belief that the *Riverdance* steps for the main dancers, not the lead performers, are not very difficult, as when dancing to a track the sounds do not actually have to be performed and a dancer can relax a bit more than if they had to hit all those beats. But the competitive dance form is a form that favours those who can jump higher and move faster, with precision, strength and grace.

Other choreographers, and Peter himself, referred to the ways youth is prized in Irish dance. Kristyn mentioned how within the Irish dance shows there is the notion that "there's always somebody younger, blonder, skinnier". Likewise, Breandán spoke about how Catherine Foley, his PhD supervisor, remarked on the performance that he choreographed but did not perform for his PhD, saying to him that she felt he made the lead role for himself, and that had he been younger, he would have performed it himself. However, after his PhD, Breandán became more comfortable with the idea of performing at an older age. Peter, also referred to getting older and feeling that he couldn't still dance in a line up in *Riverdance* or similar shows, with young teens and those in their early 20s. He wanted to "break free and try something else". Jokingly he also spoke of letting the young people dance, instead of performing himself:

> Breandán's like 10 years older than me and he can't stop putting himself in his own shows (laughing). I always tell him you know just choreograph it, sit there and let somebody else do it. You know but then he says to me that I'm no longer the young person, he's working with the younger people now and I should sit back as well.

Clearly these choreographers are challenging this norm by performing as older dancers and some are struggling with their decision to do so. Whether it is an obvious struggle or something less overt, something that is just in the back of their minds, it is apparent that their thoughts are often brought back to the question of youth. However they have differing perspectives on its significance and on how aging should be accommodated within Irish dance. At the same time their work does often reflect how they responded to the stage of their career they had reached in competitive and show dancing and their desire to develop their practice in new ways. As I explore next, contemporary dance has been a significant influence on their work.

The question of contemporary dance

The skill and age norms within traditional Irish dance are certainly limiting for innovative Irish dance choreographers and dancers. For many, the freeing nature of contemporary dance seems to have provided ways to subvert the rigidity of traditional Irish dance. As I have already stated, several of the dancers I interviewed for this research chose to

undertake a Masters in Contemporary Dance at Limerick, while others undertook training in contemporary dance elsewhere and were also strongly influenced by this dance form. It seems clear that many of the choreographers had reached a point where they felt they had learnt and experienced all they could with Irish dance, and for those with questions about movement and how to affect others with their movement, contemporary dance was the natural choice of dance form to consider. It is well known for not adhering to any particular movement requirements, and for encouraging dancers to question and explore. Thus it makes sense for those dancers aiming to move into a more contemporary realm with their performance, whether to be taken more seriously as a dancer or to produce different types of work, to study this form.

Many felt that training in contemporary dance had given them the extra skills and knowledge that they felt they needed, and the confidence to move their dancing beyond the world of Irish dance. Catherine Foley elaborated on this:

> I think it's given them confidence in a way to move outside the box of competitive culture, in the sense of giving them confidence to get a degree in contemporary dance. I think they might like having a degree in contemporary dance, so in the sense that they can meet with choreographers in contemporary dance and that they can work with them and work with other contemporary dancers and I think it might give them that string to the bow that they want, do you know? That's it, and I think it's kind of, it's a way of working and they like the way that contemporary dancers work, I think that's why they like doing that, and then they're coming back to Irish dance.

Indeed, a degree is something that shows a certain level of knowledge and skill, which most certainly gives dancers more confidence dealing with choreographers and others in the contemporary dance world, which has a very different set of norms and expectations. And as already noted, many in this world would consider Irish dancers to just be practitioners of an ethnic dance form, not experts of one of the classical dance styles, and thus not take innovative Irish dancers seriously. Therefore this degree is very important in showing their worth. Catherine explained why people take various courses: "…because that's what they need, it's the need they have because they're trying to fill the

gap, some gap they see in themselves. That's the way I see it. It's the next step really to go forward for them." The course can prove to themselves and others, that these dancers have the skill, knowledge and capability to continue producing new and interesting work.

Kieran told me of how having initially interviewed for the traditional Irish dance performance course, she was accepted onto the course, but circumstances meant she couldn't study at that time. She said a few years later she returned to her plan to study:

> I thought you know I really do want to study and get my MA and dive in more intensively and I would love to go to Limerick but at that point I realized that I had my TCRG already and I had been already teaching and performing and had my own school already, so I really felt like doing the MA in contemporary dance with the focus on choreography and the somatic approach, would be more beneficial to me at that point, so yea so using like the contemporary thought, contemporary practice approaches to choreography and the mind body training, those were the things I really focused on and was happy to be training in at UL.

This story is interesting for multiple reasons including Kieran's decision later in life to study contemporary dance. Irish dance was largely all she knew and practised her whole life; besides some jazz and tap as a teenager in high school, she mostly focused on Irish dance. It is significant that, like her, many of these choreographers were older, sometimes in their 30s or later, when they decided to explore contemporary dance. They were all at an age where they had achieved a lot as Irish dancers and possibly all that they could achieve solely through Irish competitive and show dance. Thus many felt a need for a new approach to widen their knowledge and skill base. They no longer wanted to be approaching dance only through the perspective of traditional Irish dance, but through that of contemporary dance.

Like Kieran, Colin reflected on being an older dancer, at a different stage in his life, and asking different questions of dance. He felt he had reached a point where he was just doing steps, just going through the movements. He had seen contemporary dancers who really moved him with their performances, but he also felt he didn't understand what he

was seeing, despite feeling such a strong reaction. So the masters gave him the words to describe it and more of an understanding of what was occurring. Contemporary dance, he argues offers Irish dancers a way to move forward: "Certainly a lot of us there have worked in larger shows and have come out of those still asking more questions of ourselves or of it and so we've all taken I suppose our own path into contemporary dance to see if that's a way to find a way out of it you know." Indeed, as mentioned before, contemporary dance is certainly thought of as the dance form which asks questions, questioning or challenging the norm, and also focuses on embodiment bringing the dancer back to a sense of feeling the movement, considering how various movements feel in the body as opposed to doing them purely for aesthetic reasons. Its openness allows the Irish dance choreographers who are exploring contemporary dance to do so in different ways. As Colin explained: "…it's not one size fits all and I think that is the thing that contemporary dance has offered to us is a space and a place to kind of mature as performers or follow the things that are actually of interest to us and then also give us the tools to kind of work with that."

The way that contemporary dancers approach dance is an important factor in why these dancers chose to study contemporary dance. Colin expanded upon this:

> I mean I find I have a very different type of conversation about dance and movement and choreography and work and art, let's say, within the contemporary dance community both here initially at the university and then kind of beyond. A different kind of conversation to the one I would have in traditional dance circuits where I guess the focus still is on either a certain level of virtuosity or a certain standard of dance from a technical perspective. And then I suppose going to the world of performance then it tends to be about how great the spectacle is or how much charisma somebody has or how excited people got when they saw it.

Thus he really wanted to approach dance differently, and found others who appreciated and understood his approach within the contemporary world. For him, some of the things he was trying to do with dance were fairly subtle, but there was space to talk about

that within the contemporary dance community, whereas he felt that was more difficult in the traditional Irish dance community.

In a similar way to these other choreographers, Leighann felt it was important to expand her abilities and knowledge through studying with choreographers of modern dance. However unlike the other choreographers, Leighann began studying contemporary dance at a very young age. While she had similar reasons, arguably her experience of Irish dance is very different and she likely had a lot less to overcome than the other choreographers who were battling the public's and other dancers' sometimes critical perspectives of those who have only practised Irish dance. And indeed, now Leighann seems to have much success within the contemporary dance world. When she is performing in that world, she is considered a contemporary dancer, whereas most of the other Irish dance choreographers are doing work within the contemporary world that is still seen as a version of Irish dance because they are not trained as contemporary dancers from a young age as she was.

For Leighann and Darrah who trained in specific styles of modern dance, it is easier to be seen as contemporary dancers than for the choreographers who trained at Limerick where their contemporary dance course explored and questioned movement but without extensive training in particular modern dance techniques, such as those developed by Martha Graham or Merce Cunningham. As Kieran reflected:

> I guess really it was more postmodern than modern dance and a lot of that is about like, there's an understanding in postmodern dance that it's like saying no to technique and no to convention. So you're kind of undoing a lot and in the process of doing that, the movement can be a little stripped down, it doesn't look always like dancey dance, concert dance, but I think the mover gets a real again like embodied practice and a mindful sense of moving from the inside out, which coming into it as a traditional step dancer that was very useful because I think as a step dancer we have a certain body posture that's ingrained in us, a certain alignment, a certain way of holding our head, a certain way of looking, you know using our eyes and everything so it was kind of like undoing all of that.

Indeed, both Colin and Kristyn also described their training as stripping back their dancing to the essentials. So the way they thought about dancing and movement changed. It was less about virtuosity and embellishments, and more about moving from an authentic place and expressing something with this movement.

As I will discuss more fully in chapter 5, one of the key techniques they explored was release technique, which strongly influenced them both. Release technique is concerned with not tensing the muscles and only using what you need to move. Thus Kristyn and Colin's movement became more grounded. Kristyn spoke of dancing "more down and into the ground as opposed to dancing on top of it". Both she and Colin felt that release technique was what had the biggest impact on their dancing from contemporary dance. Release technique and the techniques of contemporary dance pay more attention to how it feels to move than Irish dance techniques, and have a greater respect and understanding of the dancing body. Safety is also important within this movement practice. Within traditional Irish dance, safety is not usually considered. Warm ups are often not very thorough, and safety may only be considered in terms of the best training methods to ensure a dancer performs at their best, perhaps improving flexibility, speed, or stamina, thus doing something to ensure a dancer will win, rather than ensuring the body is safe.

For Erin Hayes, Irish dance safety is something she is passionate about, and something that she feels everyone within competitive Irish dance is overlooking. She researched the landing techniques of Irish dancers and the effects this has on the body for her masters thesis and explained that the way Irish dancers land is completely different to any other dance form. Irish dancers are taught to land on the ball of their feet, with a straight leg, in comparison to other dance forms, where they bend the knees and land the heel down as well to absorb shock. She explained that the Irish dancers' method of landing goes against the body's natural way of landing, and this only became a trend starting in about 1990:

> Honestly, if you can make it out without an injury, then you're really lucky, because what you're doing to your body is just so completely unnatural and you're not actually able to do it long term because of

> the stress effects and the injuries that ensue. And all the shoe companies, all the floor companies, everybody is completely lying to you and I think they just don't know the science. The effects of the shock when you land happens before your body can compensate for any additional impact that's happening, so when you hit the floor and you're straight, that impact happens before your body, in that you know 8 milliseconds that the force flies up your leg.

With this knowledge, Erin focuses on safety when teaching the dancers in her non-competitive Irish dance school. However, she battles against the norms of the tradition, trying to help her dancers to appear to have good technique and skill, but also trying to maintain their safety. For Marie, yoga has become an important regular practice and tool for warming up. She described how it improved her "strength and posture immeasurably". Her pre-show warm-up changed after starting yoga, it was "not just wriggling your feet around for a few minutes, but a full body warm up." She explained that she would warm up for two hours before a one-hour show. And that warm up would include contemporary dance and yoga poses. She credits the fact that she's still Irish dancing at the age of 58 to her other forms of movement. Thus it is essential that choreographers innovating with Irish dance do so, because it would be difficult for them to continue dancing later in life without either injuring themselves or changing the movements to adapt to their age. It is easy to see how release technique is a welcome antithesis to rigid competitive Irish dance, in terms of ensuring safety and longevity as a dancer.

The choreographers were not just drawing on contemporary dance choreography, but looking beyond that to other elements of staging and performance. For Peter this included the lights and music and the entire style of other forms of dance. Kristyn also felt that how she worked with music changed. She explained: "I know that we, as an Irish dancer, we work very closely with music, but I started using it to influence different body parts maybe instead of just the feet. And actually listening too, because I still use Irish tunes, but to hear the actual tune, I use that to influence the movement. So like if the fiddle is going high and up that might be a release of the arm up into the space." She also spoke about having her eyes opened up to what she could include in a dance performance, such as audio, visual and speech, all influences from contemporary dance.

Despite these choreographers' interest in other dance and movement forms and willingness to learn from these other forms, most of them insisted that they were not borrowing movements or just creating a combination of Irish dance with contemporary. The following section explores this important issue.

Authenticity rather than 'fusion'

One of the key issues amongst these choreographers is whether their work is considered 'fusion'. Many strongly disliked the idea that their work could be considered a fusion of Irish dance with contemporary dance or whichever other styles they may draw on. To most of them, the term fusion suggested a superficial combination of two dance styles for the sake of novelty without sufficient effort and depth of work to explore the relationship between the two dance traditions. Most of the choreographers argued that their work, in comparison to fusion, was 'authentic' and 'pure'. They argued that the work they produced was authentic to themselves and their training. They felt they had trained in other dance forms and that they then embodied these movements, so when they danced and created choreography, the movements that came out of them were authentic expressions. They felt this was different to someone thinking that they could bring contemporary movements to Irish dance to make it more interesting.

One argument that arose with interviewees was that *Riverdance* was an example of fusion. Many felt this was a dance where the upper body and the lower body were not connected and that the arm movements were added as decorative but they didn't propel the movement. Breandán reflected on how when he choreographs, in contrast, he thinks to himself, "if the lower body has a reaction to the music, what is the upper body's reaction?" For him, it is important that any arm movements are initiated from the torso, meaning it was a movement that came from the centre of the body and moved outwards, often propelling movement of the body as a whole, as opposed to just making a shape with the arms. This was not something I had considered before, but after having done training in the show dancing style, I experienced this separation between the upper and lower body movements, and the difficulty of doing arm movements which were not connected to the lower body and didn't propel the leg movement. I expand upon this in the following chapter.

Irish dance innovators had much to say about their antipathy towards the term fusion and its connotations. Colin, for example, explained:

> I hate that word 'fusion' because it was so banded around in the 90s as something that was good. So I wasn't trying to combine the language of Irish dance with what we might consider to be the generic language of contemporary dance, so you know, Irish dance with a few lunges and arm movements or torso tilts in it.

Kieran also clarified her position:

> I don't use the word fusion, it's too simplified a word, you know my own movement comes from all my influences, step dancing, many, many different takes on contemporary dance, sean nós, music, yoga, so yeah I think it's just too kind of trendy and simplified a word.

Similarly, Peter reflected on his feelings about 'fusion':

> Yeah I hate the word 'fusion', anything like that yeah. I think, and I hate saying, as an entertainer you are expressing your own kind of vision I suppose and your own body language. And that's, you're not fusion, you're not, I don't think you're fusing two styles. You're bringing with you a heritage and something that your body has gone through whether it's been like dancing in a club or walking down the street, being gay, being straight, being male, being female, it's a kind of combination of all those things that you're bringing out in an expressive form, I think it's very reductive just to say, 'I'm fusing this style, with this style, together'. You're not, you're expressing something that you've taken your body through.

Thus, amongst the interviewees, most strongly disliked the idea of their work being considered fusion. Many felt that it was simplified and didn't accurately express the complexities of their work. Those choreographers who created work through fusion were certainly seen as inferior. Peter gave the example of Trinity Irish Dance Company

in Chicago, one of the early pioneers of bringing contemporary dance to Irish dance, as a form of fusion. He explained: "It's just like, you know, again their shows before were kind of quite a cheesy combo of contemporary dance and Irish dancing." Fusion was spoken of negatively by many interviewees as a combination or two different styles pasted together. As Nic put it: "That word is certainly tossed around as a pejorative because it feels, if we talk at least from the visual art world, it feels like pastiche, it's the same idea of kind of sticking two things together." So choreographers sought to create integrated, embodied and authentic work rather than crudely combine different dance traditions, and certainly did not want their work to be thought of or described as fusion.

Choreographers reflected on the various ways they worked beyond simple fusion of styles. Kieran, for example, explained how she sought to create movement that was fully integrated: "So that's always a process of digging in and trying to find new movement that feels kind of comfortable in the body. It's a lot of practice of not just pasting this next to this. Just trying to find something that feels integrated." She talked of creating movement that feels comfortable in the body, meaning that she truly embodies the movement. The notion of embodiment was clearly important to her and also mentioned by several other choreographers. Rather than speak of his own work, Colin spoke of Martin Hayes, a famous traditional Irish musician who is very experimental and creative with Irish music. Colin suggested a parallel between what Martin does with music and what he does himself with dance. As Colin explained:

> Martin's had a huge amount of influences on his music, from jazz and other forms and yet it's not, when we hear his music, it's not a fusion of that, we don't hear traditional music with a few other influences. We hear Martin's really personal take on traditional music, do you know what I mean, which he has found.

Likewise, Colin clearly valued the notion of embodiment. It was apparent that Colin felt Martin, like himself, was influenced by various other styles, but the work they produced was not part Irish, and parts of all these other styles. It was work that came from someone who truly embodied these styles. They had trained in other styles, fully immersed themselves in these styles and became fluent in them, and then the work they later produced was different because of their fluency in other styles.

Closely related to the idea of embodiment was the idea of authenticity, which is seen by the choreographers as the opposite of fusion and is central to what these artists feel they are doing and what they are striving for. For Peter authenticity might derive from bringing your personal story and background to your work. As Colin explained through the example of Martin Hayes, an artist doing authentic work was someone who had a unique view of his or her tradition. When I asked Kristyn about what moving authentically meant to her she said:

> Being honest I guess. So I'm not trying to be something that I'm not. Like I have a task at hand that I'm trying to complete or explore. Yeah it's more, it's an honest way of moving. That's such a tricky thing isn't it? Yeah like what is authentic without being so false.

Nic discussed embodiment and authenticity in a similar manner. He drew on one of his teachers, Sandy Silva, and what she had said to him:

> This is something that Sandy Silva really talked about when I studied with her is that rather than thinking about the different genres, like ok I'm going to do 6 bars of Irish step dance, then I'm going to do ten bars of Appalachian clogging, then it's kind of putting them sequentially like this, her idea was that these things can like mesh together and that the fluidity and malleability of traditions would mutually inform and undergird one another and so the movement kind of gets internalized. And then when it gets rearticulated it comes out as a new thing in your own way, something that's undeniably based in your own physicality but is undoubtably informed by these other practices.

The notion of the movement getting internalized is exactly what many of the other choreographers felt. For them any other dance forms they may have studied were absorbed into their body. Then, as Nic said, "when it gets rearticulated it comes out as a new thing in your own way." Indeed this appears to the overriding view of most of the choreographers. Several of these Irish dance choreographers were influenced by a range

of dance and movement forms. Darrah and Leighann trained in specific modern dance techniques. Kristyn explained that her past training in ballet, tap, jazz, and Graham technique from modern dance are all in her toolbox and elements that she can draw on at any point. Likewise, Peter and Breandán grew up doing other forms of dance. Peter and Suzanne, from Up and Over It, also studied a variety of dance styles when they began choreographing their work – contemporary dance, Argentine tango, tap dance, and Parkour – and "rather than stealing moves from each one of them, we kind of put that inside our bodies and then kind of with Irish dancing, try to express what we'd learnt I suppose". Indeed, most choreographers were adamant that they were not taking movements from other styles but exploring how their movement may come out differently after training in other forms. Through looking at and experiencing the movement of other dance forms or what their norms were, choreographers were inspired with how this could be done with Irish dance.

However, it was often difficult to get a clear understanding of how this type of work was produced. There was a certain mystery around the creation process, and a certain sense of the 'artist' as a special creative individual and the only person capable of producing this work. Upon seeing their dance pieces, I wondered where and how they thought of certain movements. Though their emphasis on their work as artists challenges the tendency to overlook the significance of individual creativity in shaping traditional cultural forms (Revill, 2005), it raises questions about how it can be taught, whose creativity is deemed to be original and authentic, or superficial 'fusion', and what it takes to be recognised as an Irish dance artist? It was difficult for me to see how a young Irish dancer who wanted to explore what they could do with their dance form would be recognised in this way. Would most of their work be viewed as 'fusion' because of their lack of experience or credibility as an innovative dance artist? Thus there is a question of how it is possible to teach others to create new but 'authentic' work in Irish dance (which I consider more in Chapter 6).

While most choreographers where highly critical of the idea of fusion, some took the term fusion to mean a deeper and more complex combination of different cultural influences and linked it to an understanding of cultural change based on the continuous meeting of different cultural traditions. In response to questions of fusion, Marie Clerkin

explained how everything is fusion. She said fusion might be a representation of dual identities, being from different cultures. She went on:

> You could argue that the people who want traditional Irish dancing don't really know what they're talking about because traditional Irish dancing is… well wasn't that handed down from dancing masters from France and Italy? Aren't these quadrilles from somewhere else? Aren't some of the steps that we do where we point our toes and some of the terminology from the world of ballet? So I think these lines… you know you jump forward a couple of hundred years and they'll just be a nonsense to divide them up… you know it's small and it doesn't really matter, what matters is that people explore and create and invent and look at each other and decide what they like, it's art.

Hers was one of the stronger responses against the notion of fusion being an issue. Breandán also argued that 'everything is fusion' and that innovation and borrowing are part of the evolution of Irish dance, and the evolution of tradition. Indeed, this is in line with arguments made by O'Toole (1996) against *Riverdance* being seen as a blending of Broadway show style and traditional Irish dance, and instead recognising how Irish dance has experienced complex changes throughout its history. Likewise, Gilroy (1993) argued that cultural practices are constantly evolving, as opposed to fixed, as they are passed on through generations. Breandán pointed to the way in which people forget that traditions have not always remained the same. He gave the example of older teachers today who see a move and say it's not Irish dance, yet who were "trailblazers" back in their day and created new moves then. But in comparison to Maire, he did strongly dislike work that he viewed to be fusion in a crude sense.

The only choreographer who fully embraced the term 'fusion' was Darrah Carr. Darrah is a choreographer who has developed her own style in New York, called ModErin. From its name, it is apparent that it is a combination of modern dance and Irish dance. As a child she studied Irish dance and ballet, and when she went to college she was introduced to modern dance, which she found was:

> wonderfully freeing, you know the rigid vocabulary of ballet and the rigid vocabulary of Irish dance, modern was very expressive and ideas about moving the arms and torso, and partnering work, and using the floor, it just opened up a whole world of possibility for me. And when I eventually began to choreograph during college and then later in my Masters programme at NYU I started asking myself well why do these systems have to be so separate, you know all these vocabularies exist in my own body, can I try to blend them or fuse them in some way to create a unique style, I guess was my real interest. So it began as a really personal exploration, you know I had these different training systems, why must they always be so separate, how can I combine them into something that speaks uniquely I hope.

Similarly to other choreographers, the idea of embodiment and having these forms of movement ingrained within her body was important. But unlike the other choreographers, she seemed to have a much clearer idea of how she created work, even though she said she didn't always produce the same types of pieces. Perhaps this also came from the fact that she was not against fusion in a direct sense. There was no style or movement that she deemed to be wrong and described sometimes using a piece of Irish music, but having choreography that is very contemporary, or doing an "unadulterated piece of Irish step dance", her nod to the show form of Irish dance. Yet she also spoke of at other times seeing if she could match what the legs were doing with the arms, or of taking a movement, for example a turn, in ballet, modern and Irish and explore how the various ways of turning could be fused together. Like Kristyn, she also drew on spatial patterns and the rhythms of Irish dance, and described bringing modern dance to this and being much more open to the possibilities of what she produced.

In contrast, those choreographers who strongly disliked the notion of 'fusion' seemed to have much stricter ideas about what could or could not be a possibility. There was a sense of them trying to maintain the quality of their dance form, and only finding certain forms of experimentation acceptable or true to the dance form. Perhaps this came from a dedication to the dance form, to wanting to change it in a way that honours its origins. However, who gets to be the person who determines whether the dance form has been honoured or treated appropriately when being transformed? (I address this question of

evaluation more fully in the next chapter). As I will discuss in the next section, their views on the term fusion also significantly affected how choreographers defined themselves.

The issue of descriptions and definitions

For choreographers who are no longer strictly competitive or show Irish dancers, the questions of what they call themselves and how they define their style of dance are not easily resolved. Some struggled to come up with a name that accurately describes where they have come from and where they are now, in terms of their dance practice. Peter, from *Up & Over It*, reflected on how initially he defiantly insisted that they were Irish dancers, and thus "flying in the face of everybody's perception of it". But now they generally call themselves folk dancers because in marketing it makes sense as they don't just do Irish dancing anymore and what they do "would be quite unrecognizable as Irish dancing". Yet, Peter also personally describes himself as an artist but is reluctant to describe himself that way more widely and this may reflect the idea of Irish dancers as entertainers rather than artists: "But I call myself an artist, I wouldn't say I'd maybe say that to other people." Within conventional Irish dance, there are very clear ideas of what Irish dance is and people experimenting with it are not the norm, nor are they necessarily seen as 'good' for the dance form. So perhaps his hesitancy to call himself an artist comes from being affected by criticism within the Irish dance world.

Like Peter, Colin called himself an artist, but he called himself a traditional dance artist for marketing purposes:

> Yeah it's weird because I talk about this quite a lot in terms of what do you call yourself because initially after I did the MA here and then started making work I suppose I was trying to rebrand myself in a way, so it's like well what do you call yourself? I'm not, I can't call myself a contemporary dancer because that, we all know that a contemporary dancer means a certain type of dancer or somebody who's had a certain type of training which I haven't had. Now if I call myself a traditional dancer that implies that I'm just kind of a little bit narrow in my view (laughing). So then you kind of start saying what the fact is so I'm a traditional dancer who began working in the field

> of contemporary dance and that just sounds too long winded, or you feel like you're just explaining yourself too much. At this stage I'm kind of happy enough to just call myself a traditional dance artist and just leave it at that.

Colin and Peter both struggled at some stage with how their name could best represent their new and unusual style of work. It may be that because Colin works within contemporary arenas, in which it is normal for dancers to call themselves artists, he feels comfortable defining himself in this way.

Yet, in discussing this issue with me both choreographers also returned to the idea of themselves as Irish dancers, or traditional dancers. Peter considered how his early work was mocking *Riverdance* (I expand on this in chapter 5): "Identifying and redefining what Irish dancing is I suppose. And then literally once we had done that, we could do anything we wanted to do and still call it Irish dancing because we were Irish dancers, I suppose." It is interesting that Peter said they could do whatever they want and still call it Irish dancing, when earlier he had said his work was really unrecognisable as Irish dance. Likewise, Colin was discussing Martin Hayes and Israel Galvin, a musician and dancer respectively, whom he uses as "benchmarks" for himself, in how they are working with their tradition. Colin reflected: "Israel Gavin, he would call himself a flamenco dancer, because that's what he is, but he's just working with it in a very different way, he's not denying that. So I've just come back now a little bit full circle to kind of that I am a traditional dancer." So while Peter and Colin recognized their separation from Irish dance, in some ways they also did not feel like they would call themselves anything other than an Irish dancer. This suggests a model of tradition and authenticity which incorporates change and experimentation.

Likewise Kieran feels that every movement she performs comes from her base as an Irish dancer, despite the fact that her style of movement now differs from traditional Irish step dancing, and that she has many more influences affecting her. As she explained:

> If I'm describing my own dance style, I do feel like my first language in dance was traditional Irish dance, step dance and I really mean that

> like a language, like it's my native tongue in dance. I started when I was five and I never stopped, I never took a break from it and I've studied other things but I always feel like even when I'm studying other forms of dance I feel like I'm translating them through that first language. With Sean Nos you know I'm not from Ireland, I'm not from Connemara, I'm not an Irish speaker, so I guess I don't really say I'm a sean nós dancer. I say like it's a big part of what I perform and practice and teach, it's a passion, I love it. But you know again I was a step dancer for 15 years first, so everything kind of comes out of that I think.

It is significant that Kieran feels she can't say she is a sean nós dancer because she is not from Ireland and she is not an Irish speaker. She extensively studies, teaches and performs the dance form, yet doesn't feel comfortable saying she is a sean nós dancer. However, she is comfortable calling herself an Irish step dancer, even though she is not from Ireland and she is not an Irish speaker; in this case these factors do not appear to matter which suggests that the traditional associations of sean nós dancing make it appear more ethnically exclusive than step dancing and that it is easier to feel a sense of belonging within Irish step dancing than within sean nós. This may be because Irish step dancing is practised internationally while sean nós is much more deeply embedded within Ireland, and within Connemara particularly.

However, this question of Irishness, of being Irish enough to be taken seriously as an Irish dancer, was mostly felt to be irrelevant by interviewees. Most believed that what mattered was whether the person was a good dancer or not. Catherine Foley felt that the idea that you needed to be Irish may be more of an outsider's perception: "If you're outside, if you're looking for a Ghanian dancer you think they must be better if they're in Ghana. And if you're looking for an Irish dancer they should be, you're thinking they 'should be better' [in Ireland] –and I put inverted commas there – than a dancer from elsewhere because they feel well that's where they're immersed in it, people have that expectation." She cited Jean Butler being from America and Colin being from England, as examples of how great Irish dancers are not always people who have grown up dancing in Ireland.

Nevertheless, this issue of ethnic origins does not always feel irrelevant. Leighann felt that she was at a disadvantage by not being Irish. As she explained:

> That I do think, yeah and because I'm not Irish at all, it's not even in my blood, I'm not even an Irish person who lives in America and so I feel behind the eight ball like I'm almost the opposite extreme than somebody who's from Ireland experimenting with Irish dance, I'm the opposite, I'm an American trying to maintain the Irish tradition because I love that culture.

For Leighann her work maintains the Irish tradition, despite her Irish dance being very different, and being strongly influenced by contemporary dance. She seemed to feel that by not being a competitive step dancer, and by having a passion for the music and the dance of Ireland, she is trying to preserve a purer version of the dance form. Yet it was a very different version to what most would consider Irish dance. But, as she went on to say, she feels ethnic origins and ethnic markers such as accent do affect how her work is viewed:

> So I do think that first of all if you have it in your blood you win, you know like jackpot, anyone will take you more seriously. Second of all if you have it in your voice anyone will take you more seriously, which is another challenge because I'm over here like trying to protect the living daylights out of it (laughing) and I'm like Russian or something. So yeah I do think you're taken more seriously, particularly if it's in your voice yeah.

It is possible that because she is American, the question of ethnic authenticity is particularly an issue for Leighann given the focus on roots, ancestry and ethnic difference in American culture (Alba, 1990; Waters, 1990). In addition, being located further away from Ireland, in comparison to choreographers of new Irish dance in England, for example, may mean that she sees Ireland as a more distant and different place and thus feels further away ethnically as well as geographically from Ireland.

Others emphasised the inclusivity of Irish dance. Nic, who never competed or trained exclusively in Irish dance, believed that Irish dance "is really unique and very beautiful in the way that it allows people from many national backgrounds to be part of its scene. It really welcomes people." However, in discussing his own work where he often trains or collaborates with dancers from various traditions, he considered himself as an outsider, and his thoughts echoed Leighann and Kieran regarding not truly belonging:

> I want to have a relationship with these communities, I want to have a relationship with Cape Breton, I want to have a relationship with Connemara and the West of Ireland, I want to have a relationship with the people in the South of Spain but I don't want to be from there and I don't want to go native [laughing] cause in some ways that feels disingenuous because I'll never be able to harness the incredible power of Buleria the way a flamenco dancer who was born in Granada can, likewise my *Job of Journeywork* [a traditional Irish hard shoe dance with a set choreography] is never going to be as a good as someone who studied under you know Marion Turley in Birmingham in England, so that's ok with me, I've come to grips with that [laughing].

Nic is not someone who has dedicated himself to one practice, so it is understandable that he would not see it as genuine to say he would be as good as someone who exclusively trained in one of those forms. But his thoughts are significant in that they illustrate how he felt that someone who is native to the place of their dance form is a stronger dancer. However, it is possible that he downplays his own talent and skill and reveres those who he often works with, despite being in a unique situation as a dancer who joins various dance communities at different times to work with them. Catherine made an interesting comment echoing Nic's thoughts:

> I've come across a lot of stuff like this in Flamenco. People feel that unless you come from Andalucia that you're not a great Flamenco dancer. No matter how great you are, if you do all these classes in the country you come from, you're still not the true Flamenco dancer.

It is significant that some may have this view, but this is more likely to be the belief of an outsider to the dance form and to the country in question. Most innovative choreographers and dancers do not feel a need to prove a certain level of 'Irishness' but most either come from Ireland or have family or ancestral connections with Ireland. The inclusivity of Irish dance may be thus both experienced as real but at the same potentially limited to those with immediate or diasporic connections.

Conclusion

This chapter considered the geographies of alternative forms of Irish dance, laying out the links between key choreographers, and considering in particular the significance of the University of Limerick and the city of Limerick itself to the development of these new dance works. These choreographers have been motivated to develop new forms of Irish dance for a range of reasons including the wider public's negative perceptions of Irish dance, and their own desires for the dance form to be more expressive, suited to their individual body and considered an art form. They have struggled to go against the norms of skill and age within the Irish dance world which they have been taught to see as valid throughout the many years of their training.

These choreographers have been strongly influenced by contemporary dance, the dance style which rejected the performance and technique requirements of ballet, requirements that often forced dancers to mould themselves to the dance form, in favour of creating performances which enabled the dancers to determine the rules of the dance form themselves- if they said it was a dance, it was. Yet, while alternative Irish dance forms can be seen as more 'freeing' in movement style than traditional competitive or show Irish dance, it is not the case that anything is accepted by the choreographers as a valid alternative form of Irish dance. Instead they actually have strong opinions about how it can be done.

While choreographers have been strongly influenced by contemporary dance, most are keen to emphasise that their work is not a fusion of traditional and contemporary dance. They view 'fusion' as Irish dance works that are mixed with another dance style without a clear reason for doing this, and see this as inferior to the work they are doing. They believe that their work is authentic to themselves, but also authentic to the tradition. Thus, while they are trying to escape many of the norms of traditional competitive and

show Irish dance, they are also eager that new forms of Irish dance uphold what they see as the key facets of the traditional dance form. This is whether they are critical of the term fusion or, as some do, see it as standing for the nature of cultural change. They thus mobilise a model of tradition that incorporates evolution and allows for experimentation but insist on meaningful incorporation of other styles and techniques rather than superficial or crude combinations of elements from different dance traditions. So choreographers of new forms of Irish dance are not abandoning the traditional norms in favour of complete freedom to move in any way possible and combine any styles of dance, but instead are deeply considering the appropriate ways to stay true to, and also evolve the tradition. The following chapter will consider in more depth the practices and dance works of innovative choreographers and dancers and their perspectives on questions of meaning, form and value.

Chapter 5

Innovative Irish dance choreography: meaning, expression, form and value

Introduction

By examining the work of choreographers who are doing new and innovative work with Irish dance this chapter explores themes of meaning, expression and value. The chapter is divided into five sections, in the first I consider what it means to subvert Irish dance competition and performance norms. For Peter Harding, of *Up & Over It*, subverting the norms of Irish dance is central to his work. Irish dance provides the foundations for his practice, but the intention is to "open it out and push it". For other choreographers, the aim is to explore how they can be more expressive and authentic *within* the traditional Irish dance form. Next, the chapter examines how contemporary dance and other movement styles have significantly influenced the content and practice of choreographers of new forms of Irish dance, and particularly how release technique, improvisation, and arm movements have informed their work. Following this I focus on several new Irish dance works, detailing what happens in the performances and reflecting on them. Throughout this section I consider how Irish dance is now being evaluated if it is no longer being assessed on technique. Expressing emotion, telling a story, or creating an authentic, moving performance are all key to the evaluation of new Irish dance works. The final section considers the choreographers' perspectives on how the Irish dance world and the wider public have reacted to these new versions of Irish dance, including both Irish dancers, and those who love the practice, as well as those who are not familiar with Irish dance.

Subverting Irish dance norms

The term 'Irish dance' brings to mind different things depending on one's knowledge of the dance form. For many in the general public, connections are drawn to *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance*, the Irish dance shows that have made a particular version of the dance form famous throughout the world. *Riverdance* was the first popular Irish dance show, which put Irish dance on the world stage for all to see. Its style in both dancing and costume was different to competition style: dancers used their arms, the dresses were lighter and shorter, and there was more of a performance aspect such as making eye contact instead of simply holding the chin up high and not looking at anyone. This has

developed further since its debut in the 90s; the performance aspect is more obvious. There are more head movements, eye contact with the audience, dramatic arm movements, the women dance in a traditional 'female' way- sometimes excessive swinging of the hips, shifting the shoulders with the hips, coy and flirty faces and light and delicate movement, the men dance in a more traditionally 'masculine' way; emphasising strong and rigid bodies. Many of the choreographers are now rejecting what they think of as the *Riverdance* style. Meanwhile, those with more in-depth knowledge and experience may think of Irish dance competitions: girls in wigs, elaborate, expensive and brightly coloured dresses, and dancing that occurs from just the waist down. Competitive Irish dancers themselves would be aware of the norms of the dance form and the requirements that it places on them: to dance with turned out and crossed feet, straight or arched backs, arms in tight, sharp and light movements, and virtuosity. Competitive Irish dancers would also know that conventionally only certain dances performed to certain music are considered to be Irish dance.

However, some choreographers and dancers are experimenting with and exploring new ways to do Irish dance. In their experiments they are often subverting the norms of competition and show style Irish dancing. For Catherine Foley, the creator of the Traditional Irish Dance Performance Masters at the University of Limerick, it was important that dancers have the skill to develop Irish dance in a new way. She brought in contemporary dancers to teach Irish dancers the principles of contemporary dance and help them to choreograph their own solos. Catherine did not intend for Irish dancers to become contemporary dancers, but wanted them to have new skills that would enable them to create dances that were different to competition style or Irish dance show style, as she explained:

> It didn't always have to be dancing reels, jigs and hornpipes, and there's nothing wrong with dancing reels, jigs and hornpipes, but you could create something as well that would be true to who you are as opposed to just being always assessed on technique you know, you could be assessed on your choreographic work, or how you communicate something to an audience, or other people by what you can do as a dancer and as an Irish dancer.

Indeed, Irish dance is more often assessed on the basis of technique; it is expected to be impressive and precise, and more importantly, in line with competition style Irish dance. However, since the success of *Riverdance*, there has been an increasing emphasis on the "spectacle" (O'Connor, 1998). Some choreographers developing new forms of Irish dance struggle to reconcile this shift in audience expectation around spectacle. For Colin Dunne it was clear that this was something he particularly grappled with in his show *Out of Time*, which premiered in 2008 and was his first full-length solo show. On his website, the show is described as "both an unsentimental homage to Irish step dance, and a bold investigation of Dunne's personal and artistic relationship with a tradition that has shaped his life" (Dunne, 2019). This show included movement, sound, film and text with Irish step dance, and presented Irish step dance in a new and very different way. Colin reflected on *Out of Time* and how he hoped his performances would be viewed without being constrained by the norms and expectations of Irish dance.

> Part of the journey for me was trying to get away from that notion that if you walk on stage with those shoes or as yourself then that people just go ok this is Irish dance, so they're just reading it wholly on the level of that kind of cultural, that kind of context of culture and this is Irish dance, we know what it is and so show me what you've got. And certainly the discussions around when I was making *Out of Time* was kind of slight fantasies that people would experience it as something else other than just Irish dance, that it would be an experience of just something else or an experience of my own relationship to it that was expressed by doing it in a certain way or expressed through my relationship with the films or expressed through my relationship with sound, expressed through text.

For Colin, and many of the other choreographers, there is clearly a desire for their work to be recognised not just as Irish dance, but as dance in a wider sense. They wanted their work to be judged by audiences on the basis of the emotional response that it evokes, not how it impresses them as an Irish dance. In a review of the performance on *The Guardian*, Judith Mackrell writes that it is "definitely not one for the *Riverdance* fanclub" (Mackrell, 2009). Indeed, for those expecting to see the dance form they may have come to know and love through *Riverdance* or similar shows, they may struggle to enjoy the work of

choreographers who are seeking to interrogate their dance form, challenge themselves and audiences, and present something entirely new that they still call 'Irish dance'. As Mackrell (1991) wrote of the postmodern choreographers, these choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance are also rejecting the norms of their dance form, including the expected display of technique, elaborate costumes and impressive movements.

'What is Irish Dance?' is certainly a question considered by many who are developing new forms of Irish dance. Colin reflected on how, in the years after his Masters in contemporary dance, he came to realize that traditional Irish dance was created and constructed by people just like him, and this was a release for him since it allowed him to situate himself within an evolving tradition despite the dominance of its institutionalised form. Referring to the formalization of Irish dance in 1927 he discussed how he thought about men sitting around deciding what would and would not constitute Irish dance, and which regional dance style of Ireland they preferred, and which they disliked. He said:

> I mean the way Irish dance is now at grassroots level is purely the result of a series of executive decisions about what to wear, what you can't wear, what you should do, what you can't do, about the number of feises [competitions], about how teaching is done, about how you can't go and take a workshop with somebody else, it's all executive. And so you know if I think back to then before that time when people just danced then you know they heard a tune and they danced and I assume they had some kind of technique, you know how to stay in time or some vocabulary, but they just danced. And that again was a huge release for me or relief to discover that and to kind of go back to the time and to kind of in my own mind kind of slightly wipe out that big grand national agenda from it and just say well it's just dance. So, I'll take this language and this form and just fuck those men in the suits - put that in your PhD - and just work with it how it feels authentic to me.

For Colin, an awareness that the rules and norms of Irish dance were created by people just like him, and an understanding that norms became established simply because

someone made a decision at some point in history on what was or was not Irish dance, gave him the freedom to feel confident that what he was creating was Irish dance. Indeed, scholarly work within the humanities and social sciences has established that many "traditions" were invented, particularly when countries were seeking to create a national culture that would distinguish them from other countries, as Ireland did after it gained independence in 1922 and encouraged the Irish people to take up Irish dance (Foley, 2001; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012). Like Colin, Catherine Foley believed Irish dancers could experiment with the dance form because they had trained for years in it, they had a deep understanding and appreciation of it in its "traditional" competitive form:

> They know the rules, they've spent years training, training on technique, and the aesthetic, but now let's see where you can go. You've mastered that, now where will you go with this mastery? Now what are you going to contribute back to this tradition with that mastery? What are you going to tell other people with this mastery? How are you going to develop it to the next level for yourself? Even if you have won a world championship, you know you can win it numerous times, that says yes you're a great Irish dancer from the point of view of competition, but to me there was always the possibility, the potential for there to be more. And I wanted Irish dancers I suppose to think in a more, in a broader, more artistic, thinking, thinking way.

Catherine clearly feels that Irish dance in its existing realms of competition and show dancing can be limited. Her desire for dancers to "think in a more, in a broader, more artistic, thinking, thinking way" illustrates how many dancers may currently just be 'going through the motions'. They perform at a high level within already established rules and norms, but she asks if they can challenge these norms, or if they can question their dance form, or why they do what they do. The choreographers whose work is examined in the following section are doing just that, challenging the norms of *Riverdance* and the shows where they spent years as professional dancers, dancing in one particular way.

One way that choreographers have challenged the *Riverdance* norms is through redefining gender and sexuality. Many have noted the gendered norms in costumes and dance style in competitive Irish dance (Foley, 2013; Kavanagh et al., 2008; Wulff, 2007). The costumes for girls are hyper-feminine, and there is not an option for them to wear anything else. Meanwhile, boys have more variety in their costume norms. Some may choose to a waistcoat that is extremely colourful, decorative and dotted with diamontes, while others may choose a plain colour that they view as simply and "masculine". They have more freedom than girls to determine what version of masculinity is produced through their costume (Kelly 2014). However, boys are clearly encouraged to dance in a "masculine" way, and discouraged from having any other style. It has also been argued that male competitive Irish dancers "have the additional burden of proving their masculinity either in direct confrontations or also by participating in sport" (Hall (2008: 117). For both genders, there is clearly a struggle to make individual decisions regarding costumes or dance styles, as the necessity to conform within their dance school and within the wider Irish dance norms is overwhelming. When young women and men join professional Irish dance shows, the gendered norms become even more apparent, and choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance have sought to reject this.

In aiming to create gender equality in their performances, Peter and Suzanne from *Up and Over It*, drew on famous old Hollywood tap couples from the 1930s, and what they saw as their equality in performances. They wanted to emulate this, instead of the man standing out as the lead while the woman joins him, as is traditional in Irish dance shows. Breandán de Gallaí tackled gender and sexuality through having two men dance together in his show, *Linger*. This was revolutionary for Irish dance, where there is always a male and female coupling. The two men in *Linger*, Breandán and his dance partner, also danced soft shoe pieces barefoot, a contemporary dance norm, which would never occur in Irish dance. In shows like *Riverdance*, men never do soft shoe pieces, they only ever do hard shoe, as this is seen as more masculine. Within the competition world, men do take part in soft shoe reels, so dancing soft shoe would not have been new to them, but it would have been new as a performance. Breandán strongly disagreed with the norm of gendered dancing within both competition culture and performance culture, where men and women are only allowed to do certain moves or even entire dances. Therefore this was something he sought to reject in his performances.

The Question of Meaning and Expression

As well as subverting typical gendered norms, choreographers are also rejecting the romanticised versions of Irishness expressed through *Riverdance* and other Irish dance shows of this same model. They are seeking to redefine Irishness and what an Irish dance performance can be through their own shows and performances. For Peter, it was important that his Irish dance performances explore issues that are relevant to him and his peers. He reflected on how he and his dance partner Suzanne had been professional dancers since they were 17 years old:

> …And then we were turning 30, Suzanne was in a show called *Magic of the Dance* and she was the personification of the famine and she was wearing like a leather mini skirt and horns and everything, and I was like you have to get out, you have to do something different. And it had been niggling in my mind that we could do something different with Irish dancing, like using cultural references that me and my friends know. And we lived in East London and we just looked around and we wanted to make Irish dancing relevant for my peers, not just young Irish dancers or old people around the world like *Riverdance* is.

Peter and Suzanne felt that they had reached their limit within the traditional Irish dance shows. They were no longer content with performing and sharing dance that did not feel authentic and meaningful to them. To them, the "folk mystery that had started since *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance*" that accompanied many of the traditional Irish dance shows was a significant aspect that they disliked. And as they were also some of the oldest dancers in these shows, at the age of 30, they also felt too mature for these roles. With age they became more confident that they could indeed create shows themselves.

It was against this backdrop that Peter and Suzanne created their own work under their group name of *Up and Over It*, so-called as a statement against the classic Irish dance shows, or as Peter phrased it: "A fingers up to, to an Irish dance show, not to Irish dancing but to all the kind of, the so many different Irish dance shows all kind of peddling this kind of you know monks and fire and mystical and wicked and all this kind of stuff. So up and over was meant to be like we're just over it, we're up and over it." This is significant as it shows they were clearly presenting themselves to be about a

different kind of Irish dance, and that they disliked what the Irish dance shows already were. Some of the work that they created, particularly their early work, was a satirical look at the competitive Irish dance world and *Riverdance*, questioning the norms of both. Peter believes that through this work they were identifying and redefining Irish dance. He reflected that initially he had loved *Riverdance*, but he and Suzanne eventually came to find it "unbelievable" and even "ridiculous". He felt that they themselves were ridiculous for taking part it in, and that this new work was in some ways in dialogue with the old, but at the same time liberating them from the confines of traditional Irish dance. This is significant, in that it seems Peter and Suzanne believed that beyond the show's fans, many feel *Riverdance* is ridiculous, and that they had to show that they also felt this way to be taken seriously by that wider public.

Peter and Suzanne's work to redefine Irishness came from their dissatisfaction of how Irish culture is often presented. Peter reflected on this:

> We hated this perception of Ireland generally and Irishness as this place where Americans go to find their heritage, like a heritage site the whole of Ireland was. So you know part of what we were doing was to say no, Irish culture, and cultural identity, and Irishness is a modern, living, breathing thing and that's what we were trying to represent.

Indeed, while many of the traditional Irish dance shows appear to focus on certain stories of Ireland and historical issues told in a certain way, such as the famine or migration of Irish people, Peter and other choreographers wanted to explore more relevant issues. Similarly, Breandán felt that the myths of Irishness in Irish dance shows were catering to tourists and people searching for an idealised version of Ireland. He also wanted his work to reflect issues of the present day, such as how his show *Linger* considered being gay and ageing. Their active reworking of Irish dance and its meaning speaks to the idea of 'tradition' not as something which is static or held in the past but as something that is changing in response to present day issues and concerns (Gilroy, 1993).

The geography of audiences is important to consider. Indeed, many shows cater to audiences from outside of Ireland, who are often searching for an idealised version of

Ireland. Therefore the work of choreographers who are exploring present day issues that Irish people are dealing with resonates less with these audiences. Peter reflected on one of their shows called *Riot*, which explored "Irishness and changing what perceptions of Irishness are". Peter perceived that audiences in Ireland have a deeper understanding of and connection with the show, than those in other places. He said: "Like they can see what we're doing, we're subverting and they see where we come from and they understand. Where you do the same show for people in Vegas and they appreciate it on face value, but they don't know the cultural, kind of what you've done to get to that place, you know. Yeah I think Ireland gets it". Thus, the show clearly holds different meanings for different audiences. The audience members bring their own individual interpretation of the story and issues. And for those within Ireland, their understanding of the issues that *Up & Over It* is exploring is deeper because these issues affect their day-to-day lives.

Choreographers who are changing Irish dance are also usually making shows on a smaller scale, in terms of their cast as well as the stage and space within which they are performed. Unlike the big Irish dance shows their value is not produced through virtuosity or spectacle. It is not uncommon for pieces to comprise just one or two people, such as in the work by Kristyn Fontanella, Colin Dunne, Jean Butler, Breandán de Gallaí and Up & Over It. For Peter, it is important to show that Irish dancers could "express movement and sometimes narrative with just two people on stage which in Irish dancing, traditional Irish dance shows, you don't usually get that". Indeed, it does seem that the use of many dancers in Irish dance shows has been to impress audiences with the high number of dancers dancing in unison, something that has taken precedence over a less impressive performance, one which may consider smaller movements, or a more subtle storyline.

The innovative work of Breandán de Gallaí does however sometimes involve big group performances but not quite to the scale of *Riverdance*. We discussed his aspirations to create an alternative Irish dance show, performing in large venues, to big audiences, but his view was that it was not possible to make money out of a big show without someone wealthy backing it. He referred to the popular show *Prodijig* and how they are struggling financially. He bemoaned the fact that promoters want to replicate the show at a lower cost, and often insist that *Riverdance* is the only viable profit model. The implication is that choreographers of Irish dance who wish to be innovative, and make a large touring

show, are likely to struggle to receive the support they would need. Conversely, those who are seeking to create smaller shows, often within the contemporary dance arena, have benefitted from their decision to veer away from the norms of *Riverdance*, as this has helped them to gain respect and following within contemporary dance world.

The dance movements of these Irish dance choreographers and performers looks very different to the typical show style of Irish dance that they would have performed in *Riverdance* or other Irish dance shows. These shows showcase skilled soloist dancers performing difficult steps and group pieces which are still impressive but less demanding. However, the work that these dancers are making now, often inspired by contemporary or other dance and movement forms, represents a stripped back version of Irish dance, that many in the world of Irish dance would not necessarily recognize as "skilled" or difficult.

Instead, the work is often about something more than just virtuosity. Much of the work is about exploring issues and meaning through the dance. As previously mentioned, the work sometimes explores Irishness and what that means today, as some of *Up & Over It's* work does. Some people's work directly comments on Irish dance, or on a choreographer's relationship to the dance form they grew up training in. Colin Dunne, Jean Butler, Kristyn Fontanella, Suzanne Cleary and Peter Harding have all commented, albeit differently, on what Irish dance is or has been, and how it has affected them. Breandán's work is broadly about exploring the "expressive potential of Irish dance". For Breandán, it's important to show that Irish dance performances can examine social issues and comment on them. He does not wish to simply comment on Irish dance, he wants to explore questions of ageing, sexuality, gender, and other concerns.

One issue that arose with some choreographers when considering expression and meaning in Irish dance was a concern about shows that they judge to be meaningless. *Prodijig* was often mentioned by choreographers as a big show that was doing something new with Irish dance, but many of the interviewees felt that it was along the same lines of the *Riverdance* model, in that it was about virtuosity, not emotion or meaning. Peter spoke about Alan Kenefick, the creator of *Prodijig*:

> I love Alan, Alan Kenefick's style is amazing, it's fantastic, I think it's absolutely brilliant, but it's kind of, it's meaningless almost you know. Like Lord of the Dance or Riverdance, it's easy then because it's meaningless, it's easy to understand. Then people want to replicate it. And then by replicating it, it diminishes the quality. Like what Alan does is phenomenal, but it's just a show piece, it's just a show case.

Peter described how in comparison, his and Suzanne's work considers the issues they want to discuss before considering what the choreography would be. He feels that Alan's work prioritises the steps and the choreography, which means "he's not trying to change people's perceptions, apart from their perception of Irish dance. He's not trying to tell them anything." While Peter does not see deep meaning in Alan's work, and their dance is stylistically different, he speaks highly of Alan. There is a respect between these choreographers for their attempts to do something innovative with Irish dance, whether or not they all entirely approve of each other's work. It is possible that this support of each other reflects the tight network of Irish dance, where everyone knows one another and have often been dancing together for years. They may have competed against each other, performed together, or looked to one another as leads in their age groups (as competitors were divided by age groups).

Similar to the question of meaningless dance performances, was the issue of whether or not choreographers were being innovative for a deeper meaning, a sense of being authentic towards themselves, or whether they were changing the form just to change the form. Some choreographers believed the latter was wrong, and that there had to be a deeper meaning behind a desire to change it. I spoke to Nic Gareiss about this. Nic is a percussive dancer who has drawn on a range of percussive dance styles including Appalachian clogging, Quebec step dance, and Irish dance. He has studied at the University of Limerick, and trained and performed with Colin Dunne. When I asked him about the issue of meaning, his response was:

> I don't think I'm at all interested in those kinds of dialogues (laughing), those kinds of questions; I am interested in the way that a person's subjectivity, their individual subjectivity whether that's their minority status, their particular national identity, their expression as

> an LGBTQ person or as a person of colour inflects their art. I'm interested in those kinds of questions, so yes I think that's kind of a cool route to take. You know Breandán is kind of starting to explore that with *Linger*, with his project. I also think Colin explores parts of his own identity as an English person and his outsiderness through his work in a way that's very subtle and very, very beautiful.

Despite saying he wasn't interested in the question of whether or not work should have a deeper meaning, it seemed clear that Nic was interested in work that is created by someone who is considering how their subjectivity affects their work, thus he also favoured some level of deeper meaning in a work.

For Catherine Foley, an Irish dance performance was enhanced if it sought to tell a story or discuss an issue. She reflected on how through the MA in Irish dance performance she and her students explored bringing Irish dance into theatre, but not a large theatre like in *Riverdance*, rather a small theatre and creating work that is thought provoking or challenging. As she explained:

> They were creating it for a thinking audience, for people who will come in and want to see something different, you know that you go away afterwards thinking gosh that was very interesting, why was it interesting? Or you get some great ideas that make you feel something or sense something different. And sometimes you know you can see lots of works around you a lot of the time, I often think about what was the last one that moved me, what was the last work I saw that actually moved me, and I'm constantly seeing very good stuff, but I do, we see so much these days, we're exposed to so much and I'm wondering but what actually moves me? And that's what I want from my Irish dancers I suppose. I wanted to be moved to a certain extent and how they did it was up to them.

For Catherine, a performance being moving or impactful in some way is a key measure of value and depth. But she is open to dancers creating moving performances in different ways. She does not feel that there is only one way to be expressive or create meaning in

work. She believes this meaning comes from the individual and wants to see people find their own voice through the medium of Irish dance:

> So find that individual voice, through the body, through dance and as I said, being able to move people, as an Irish dancer which isn't an easy thing to do. It's being able to get rid of some of the boundaries that are there and the thing is, the decision is…I don't think it's even a calculated thing, I don't think you can calculate I'm going to leave my shoes off for this piece, I'm going to use some video on it or whatever else you want to do. I don't think it's as simple as that; it's got to come from within, from the core, you know for me to really believe it I suppose, for me to find it credible. You know and I suppose I've come from theatre as well in acting, so for me theatre is about that and if I don't believe it, I don't believe it.

It is significant that Catherine argues that it is difficult to move audiences through Irish dance. Why is this? Is it because the upper body doesn't move when dancing, or because the dance form is not usually used in storytelling or emotional dance works, therefore there isn't a precedent of seeing Irish dance as a moving performance? Like other choreographers, Catherine struggles to articulate or clearly define what would make the performance moving. For her it is key that the performance has to come from the "core", thus it has to be authentic to the individual, as many of the other choreographers also believed. However, who is to judge what is "authentic" to someone and what is not? Alan Kenefick's *Prodijig* may have been true and authentic to him, yet this sentiment was not shared by other choreographers.

However, attitudes vary within the network of innovative choreographers. Colin disagreed that a work needed to have meaning or tell a story, this was something he felt they often focused on at the Masters at Limerick, but he didn't feel it was necessary. He felt it was possible to create a work that is authentic to your movement style but it didn't need to tell a story or "mean something":

> So you know it's a pretty simple dance form and so work with that simplicity and the clarity of it and embody it. And actually trying to

> perform it for me doesn't really kind of work or it doesn't always work. You can just do it and inhabit it and embody it, do you know what I mean and then we can just see it because I think the thing that's happened with Irish dance is that people have tried to make it more interesting by just adding loads of stuff on top of it and then we kind of lose what it is. And maybe this is in my own work and stripping all that away and just going back to something a little bit more essential about it, which again people find that challenging because then you're stripping away and you're giving less and less and less and it's not sexed up.

While Colin disagrees with the necessity for meaning behind a performance, he has a particular idea about how he now likes to see Irish dance. He clearly values a stripped back performance, thus shows that attempt to make the dance form edgy and interesting by, as Colin says, "adding loads of stuff on top of it", would likely not be seen as a 'good' innovations. While Colin felt Irish dance performances didn't need to be overly theatrical or tell a story, it was key for him that they are expressive of the individual. Colin reflected on how after his masters he started to work in a "fresh way with movement for myself and finding some pleasure in that and feeling like it was expressive of something, expressive of a release of something…" It appears clear that he values some form of meaning in a performance, even if the meaning is just a reflection of how the dance is affecting the individual who is performing it.

Amongst the choreographers, it is apparent that many had a deep yearning to be expressive and to create work with meaning. I asked Kieran about how choreographers may to want experiment with choreography to create more meaningful work. She reflected:

> Well… I won't speak for everyone but I do think if you have a desire to make work for a stage whether it's like performance kind of shows or whether it's more in the contemporary dance world… just to express a little bit more, like to just do your jigs and reels like it does kind of reach a point of limitation if you're trying to express conflict or storytelling or a message or whatever. So I think that's kind of one

> avenue that drives people is the idea of creating narrative out of dance and just realizing that the whole body can get involved and you can experiment with silence or music or different methods for choreographing.

For Kieran, the dances that exist within competitive Irish dance and the norms of Irish show dance limit expression. She felt that experimenting with music or not using music at all, or using different elements of the body in a performance could help to create a story. Kieran argued that one could tell stories through using upper body movement, whereas she felt that movement through the legs and feet could not produce those same narratives. Perhaps she feels this way because when one is only moving the legs and feet, the torso is restricted, and when one is animated or expressing feelings usually this happens through movements of the body as a whole. Feelings can be expressed through facial movements and positions of the torso. When one thinks of someone who is afraid, they may cower in fear, closing their body in on themselves, or if depressed, they may have head hanging down, shoulders rounded, or if angry, they may appear rigid, muscles tense, or if happy, they may appear to stand tall and confident. So to be able to use the body as a whole to express emotion is clearly much more appealing than to be restricted to just moving the legs.

Catherine also reflected on how dancers and choreographers are seeking to create work that is expressing something of themselves. She says:

> Being able to say something through dance, that is the only way you can say it and no words will say it for you, you can only do it by going through this whole process of creating the dance, pain and all, and whatever else comes out of it, yeah I think that's why they do it. And it's the artistry, to be an artist as well, to be an artist as a dancer, that's important.

Performers, dancers or choreographers are therefore approaching meaning making in their work in a variety of ways. Sometimes choreographers think about an issue and choreograph to match that theme, or try to avoid overly choreographed pieces, instead privileging improvisation more in order to be authentic. For others, the issue or story is

the overriding concern of the piece, whereas sometimes the movement is the overriding concern. For most of the choreographers who are experimenting with Irish dance, they are more concerned with expression in some way, than with virtuosity, or choreographing a simply impressive piece of choreography.

Choreography, technique and style

As discussed in chapter 4, the choreographers of new forms of Irish dance have been significantly influenced by the technique and style of contemporary dance and, sometimes, other dance or movement styles. Darrah Carr and Leighann Kowalsky were influenced by modern dance, meaning particular styles and techniques from famous modern choreographers, like the Graham style or the Cunningham style. Jean Butler, Colin Dunne, Kristyn Fontanella, and Kieran Jordan, all undertook the masters in contemporary dance at Limerick which explored a postmodern approach to different ways of moving the body rather than learn particular dance styles. Peter, Suzanne, Kristyn, and Breandán all trained in other dance styles such as ballet, tap, and jazz and brought this to their new practice. The following sections consider three particular dance techniques and ways of moving which have had a significant impact on the style of several of the choreographers.

Release Technique

Release technique, a way of moving that encourages a relaxed, as opposed to tense and engaged, body, was a contemporary practice that has strongly influenced Colin and later Kristyn, through Colin's influence. For Kristyn, release technique has had a significant impact on her dancing, and made her look at Irish dance through a different lens:

> During the MA in contemporary dance I learned about release technique so to like not tense the muscles, to not use what isn't needed, you know only use what you need to move. So I think that really helped me now create new choreography to use the body in a released way so I'm releasing the muscles and it's more down and into the ground as opposed to dancing on top of it. So I think that was the biggest change in my dancing through contemporary movement was just becoming more grounded.

For Colin, letting go of the tension in his body which came from his traditional Irish dance training was key: "So I suppose release technique has had a huge, not a huge, but it's had quite a considerable impact on how I move or even how I read dance or how I even teach traditional dance now." He felt that release technique's influence over him was a slow burning process, not an immediate change in his movement style. He reflected on how he didn't initially think to himself, "oh this is release technique and if I work it a certain way then it's going to do this to me." He believes he wasn't even really influenced by the technique until after the Masters when he began going to the studio and exploring his dancing.

> I found myself moving in a certain way and that just felt a little, I suppose if I was to use a naïve term, it just felt a little bit looser (laughing), …. And then I suppose, and then I became interested in what that was and so then in hindsight reflecting upon it I could see that this was kind of some impact of a letting go and of a muscular release and of the things that various teachers had talked about in class that ---- it went into the body first rather than me processing it in my mind and going ok I want to use this.

This is an innovative development given that release technique is the complete opposite of Irish dance technique. Irish dancers are taught to hold the body rigidly upright whereas release technique is about letting go of the muscles and, as Colin said, "working much more through the joints." For most competitive Irish dancers it would be impossible to utilise this technique as they would likely be penalised by judges for doing so. And many movements that they may have in their dances depend on muscular tension and strength. For example, it would be difficult to imagine how big jumps could be done without a strong engagement of the muscles.

The muscular tension of competitive Irish dance is one of its key aspects that Colin criticises. He reflected on how when he was competing there was quite a lot of muscular tension, but now there is even more so. He feels that this tension in the body of Irish dancers makes it hard for them to get through their dance:

> I have a theory that that's why so many, I mean getting through lead around and two jig steps was always challenging, but I have a feeling that's why so many dancers have such a challenge stamina wise to get through dances because they're already using so much of their muscle as opposed to kind of just letting go of that and just finding a more efficient and fluid way through the steps and through the movement you know. And I would use the example that a bodhrán [an Irish drum] player does not use muscle to play the bodhrán, you let go of all that and it's really the lightness the speed, the dexterity, the clarity comes from much more a control of the joints, obviously the muscles are involved but it's not coming from a muscular action or a stabbing kind of action.

It was very interesting to work with Colin on release technique during his classes at Blas in June 2017. In my diary I recorded the instructions he gave to us dancers: "Loose legs. Let go of tension. Swing leg to bring foot up to bum, not kick bum. Drop into knees and into legs with weight, not holding it up. Holding weight above you, not leaning forward. Dropping your rib cage down, not holding it out and up." We worked on exercises where we would bend into knees, and come up to straight slowly, not a static up and down movement, but flowing from one to the other. We followed this with bouncing, where we were instructed to drop the weight into the floor which would then push us out, as opposed to picking ourselves up and down. We were encouraged to relax the thighs when bouncing, not using them stiffly. When we worked on timing and rhythm in our hardshoes, Colin would say, "Listen with your thighs, listen with your legs." He was really urging us to be more attentive to our bodies. This was all very different to the way competitive Irish dancers are usually trained. One of the girls mentioned that she felt ugly dancing in this way. It was certainly looser and more relaxed, which I preferred as it felt like it required less energy than holding oneself stiffly. For example, he said to us when trebling (one of the basic movements done in hardshoes) to keep the thighs touching, knees crossed so the viewer can see both feet, as is the norm in competitive Irish dance, but when doing fast trebles to disregard the overcrossing. He said this was his opinion and the establishment would disagree, but he felt confident to overtly disregard these norms.

Improvisation

Improvisation was often discussed as something that influenced new choreographers of Irish dance. It is a concept that is rarely used in the competitive Irish dance world, beyond "messing up" steps on stage and having to "improvise" to get through the dance. Irish dancers both in competition and in shows usually have their steps set and there is a belief that dances need to be done perfectly. Colin explained that because it is strongly ingrained in Irish dancers' psyche to be afraid of "messing up" they struggle to improvise. Thus, he believes it is important to include a structured improvisation task in his classes, which I took part in at Blas at Limerick (I discuss more on this below).

Improvisation was seen to be something that was very difficult for Irish dancers because their material is usually set, thus as Carter (2000) argues, improvisation is not as freeing as many may believe. In comparison, the sean-nós dance form is improvisational, thus sean-nós dancers were recognized as being talented at improvisation. Kristyn recalled how she and a sean-nós dancer, Sibeal Davitt, got together to work on a piece with Colin Dunne. They were all supposed to be improvising, but Kristyn spoke about how skilfully Colin and Sibeal improvised and how she, in comparison, felt incapable. She related improvisation to sean-nós dancers' connection to the music, and how she felt that Irish step dancers were not connected to their music. Yet, Catherine Foley, for example, spoke about how closely Irish dance is connected to music, and how dancers struggle to get rid of the ingrained rhythm that they are used to. I do not believe that Irish dancers are not connected to their music, as their steps are so closely connected to the music. Dances must be danced "in time" to the music, and competitive dancers are very used to being judged on whether or not they are dancing "in time". However they do not necessarily respond to the music instinctually, as it could be argued that sean nós dancers do. Their dance form is improvisational, therefore they are used to improvising in response to the music from very early on in learning the practice.

One issue that arose with improvisation was the need to have a certain level of skill in the dance form before it would be possible to improvise. For Catherine Foley, improvisation is "command of something, it's mastery of something." She felt that it was only possible to improvise if a dancer knew all of the rules of the dance form; then they could play with the form, the content and the structure of the dance. Like Goldman (2010), she emphasised that improvisation was not all about spontaneous movement, but

instead requires extensive knowledge and training. Indeed dancers would need to know some steps before improvising, but it is possible that improvisation could be taught from very early on in a dancer's education. Even if they only knew two moves, it would be possible for them to play with the order of these moves, or how they did them. (This was something I focused on in the teaching section of my research which is discussed in the following chapter.) It does appear that Irish dancers are not allowed to "play" unless they are seen to have the highest level of knowledge and skill of the dance form. And even if they do have this knowledge or skill, there is so rarely a chance for them to "play" with the dance form or create choreography within the competitive dance class.

Improvisation was used by many of the choreographers as a method to choreograph. There was a sense that choreographing, or just thinking about what movements could be put together was not an authentic way to create a piece of work. Kristyn explained: "That [choreographing] I feel is very forced and very calculated whereas when I improv it's just like alright anything goes." Kristyn and many of the choreographers would improvise for a set amount of time, film their improvisation session, and then watch it back to choose which movements they liked, or which ones they could expand on. For Kristyn the improvisation process is "just a lot freer, and you can turn your brain off and it's 'authentic'." Likewise Colin believed in letting the movement unfold and felt that impulses of movement were authentic, in comparison to making decisions on how to move his body.

For Colin, creating choreography was "really excruciating", he found the number of possible choices to be intimidating. He reflected on how he didn't want to spend "hours upon hours in the studio pulling my hair out deciding that [the movements] and then performing something and probably then going 'god there were ten other ways of doing this that would have been much more interesting"'. Thus it seemed perhaps part of the appeal of improvisation was leaving it to chance and the belief that what movement arises in the improvisation was the ideal or true movement that the body wanted to express. However, Colin places clear boundaries on his improvisation, so for example, "in this section I'm going to work robustly, or in this section I'm going to work very small light moves." So his improvisation was not entirely free form, but guided and structured by rules, which was like the improvisation that he did with the students at Blas Summer School at Limerick University in which I participated.

This structured improvisation seemed an ideal way to improvise because, as Colin argued, if he just played music and told us to dance, under this pressure we would just resort to doing our choreographed steps, but with rules on what moves we were permitted to do, we were forced to move differently to usual. Indeed, as Golman (2010) argued, a dancer's technical skills can encourage particular ways of moving and hinder the freedom of improvisation, so creating rules to adhere to help to challenge the body's natural tendencies and encourage creativity. This task was surprisingly very difficult. We all stood in a circle and each person would take eight bars of the music to improvise, while we all watched. Interestingly those of us who were competitive dancers of a high level appeared to struggle the most with the task. We appeared to be trying to create something difficult, which would show off our skill, and often my feet felt stuck, or struggled to move naturally as my mind decided what combination of movements to put together in that moment. In comparison, I felt some of the dancers who were not at a high level within the competitive Irish dance world moved very naturally. Their relative experience and knowledge meant they were not encumbered by Irish dancing's emphasis on appearing skilful and demonstrating complexity.

Thinking critically was indeed mentioned as a barrier towards choreographing. Breandán argued that he choreographed best when he was not critically engaging with that he was doing. Improvisation was therefore a method he found very useful, however he felt that afterwards he struggled to figure out what he did even when watching himself on video. Indeed, it seems clear that original and unique movements often arise out of improvisation and that this can be a way to tap into creativity. I found Colin's structured improvisation at Blas really opened up my eyes to the creative possibilities of improvisation. For Leighann the overall influence of contemporary dance on the Irish dance world was allowing "freedom within such a rigid dance form." Indeed, those who are using improvisation to choreograph are doing so to explore new ways of moving within Irish dance. Another way that choreographers explored different ways of moving is through including arm movements, as competitive dance has been defined by dancers not moving their arms.

Arm Movements

Arm movements were in some ways a controversial issue. As Colin explained, "I think people are obsessed about Irish dancing arms and about using them." He reflected on how those within the Irish dance community and those outside, observers or critics, are interested in whether or not the arms are used, or they feel that Irish dance is a limited form because dancers do not use their arms. While many of the interviewees were open to new possibilities, they had particular ideas about what works. Most disliked the arm movements used in *Riverdance*, which are often ballet style, graceful arm movements. They felt these were just added as decoration, and that the torso and the lower body appeared to be disconnected. Breandán, for example, felt the arm movements should propel the movement of the body as a whole. When he choreographs, he considers if the lower body has a reaction to the music, then "what is the reaction of the upper body?" He believes the movement of the arms should be initiated from the torso, so that they are connected to the movement of the body as a whole.

Initially, I was surprised with the strong opinions on arm movements. Given that the dance form traditionally requires dancers to keep the arms held in tight, the shoulders back and the torso arching to puff the chest out, I thought many would welcome any variation in arm movements. However, through my practice-based research, I interpreted a more widespread antipathy towards arm movements that were disjointed from the feet movement. While taking part in the Fusion Dance Fest in Ireland in August 2016 and the Michael Flatley Dance Academy in London from September 2016 to May 2017. I was introduced to a range of arm movements. I experienced the sharp and rigid arm movements that are used within hard shoe dances in *Lord of the Dance* and found these difficult and not connected with the feet movement. When I was learning the dance, we were first taught the feet movements, and then taught the arm movements. It was very difficult to pair them, having been used to only ever moving my feet in Irish dance. The arm movements would change from straight at the sides, to hands on hips, to clapping and they had to be moved quickly and on time, which is very difficult when considering that the feet are also moving quickly and on time in very different ways. Once a teacher glared at me at the Fusion Dance Fest when we were rehearsing the dance and I forgot an arm movement.

While working on soft shoe pieces at the Michael Flatley Dance Academy our arm movements were not set and less rigid. To a certain degree, we were free to create whatever arm movements we wanted, but this was within the realms of what was normal for arm movements that the women in Michael Flatley's shows used during their soft shoe pieces. In these shows there is a "bad girl" and a "good girl", who are both leads and dance in a style reflective of their characters. Thus, there were arm movements which were the norm for the "good girl", more graceful and balletic, and arm movements that were the norm for the "bad girl", a little bit more improvisational and perhaps "free". So we were taught these movements as suggestions for how to move our arms. For one dance I was doing more improvisational arm movements and then added in a more ballet type arm movement, and the teacher told me not to mix the two styles as what I had been doing was more "bad girl" but the ballet style movement was more "good girl". The teachers had come to adopt these sexist gender stereotypes so that they now felt these movements were so closely related to a particular character that they could no longer mix them. In addition, these binary norms meant that they couldn't perceive a woman as being multifaceted. The women in these performances were either "good" or "bad" they did not have elements of both, or varying shades of differences. Unsurprisingly most of the choreographers doing new and different things with Irish dance were seeking to move away from these approaches.

For many, their training in other dance forms opened up their eyes to the possibilities of how they could use their arms. Colin spent time during his Masters in Contemporary Dance exploring ways of moving the upper body. However, he said, "It just never really worked for me, it felt really inauthentic to me." Indeed, the issue of a movement feeling authentic arose often for choreographers as they explored moving in new ways. However, Colin didn't just dislike arm movements for himself, he also said he didn't find anything of interest in arm movements in other people's work. "When I see them doing Irish dance and lots of complex footwork, then with some shapes [says disdainfully] in their arms, it's kind of two halves of two different things and I just don't really then know what I'm looking at." He continued, "Or I can smell it a mile off when I kind of do something and it's like that's just me trying to make myself more interesting by making a gesture with the arm but actually it has no purpose." These comments were similar to those of Breandán and Kristyn about valuing arm movements that serve a purpose.

However, some choreographers work with arm movements that are both separate to the feet movements, and arm movements that are connected to the feet movements. In May 2017 during my research trip to New York, I took a private lesson with Darrah Carr where I had the chance to experience some of her choreography. For the first dance we did, we had fairly traditional soft shoe reel steps and what felt like confusing arm movements, which were not at all connected to the steps that the feet were doing. This made me think of choreographers who had discussed arm movements being put on top of leg movements just for decorative purposes, and not propelling movement. Indeed, it felt simply like an added layer to think about, perhaps to make it more interesting or modern, when the dance worked well without the arm movements. However, the next piece we worked on clearly had much more connection between the top and bottom halves of the body. This piece was much more modern and had fewer clearly "Irish" dance movements. Perhaps the reason the arm and leg movements matched more here was because the dance was very different and contained less clearly Irish dance movements, therefore it was easier to match arm movements to these different leg movements.

Choreographers who are being innovative with Irish dance have used arm movements in a range of ways. In Breandán's show *Linger*, I observed that he had moments where him and his partner had quite contemporary movements in both the lower and upper body, which departed entirely from Irish dance. Then they would do quite traditional Irish dance soft shoe movements in the lower body, often with other contemporary movements interspersed, again in the lower body. Here there were fewer arm movements, sometimes just loosely held, and sometimes simply helping to move the body, thus connected to the leg movements. In Jean Butler's show *This is an Irish Dance*, she had moments where she did very intricate and fast arm movements, almost like Irish dance in the arms. The focus in these moments was the arms, but there was not Irish dance movements happening in the feet at the same time. In Jean Butler's show there were not really any traditional Irish dance movements, her movements in both the upper and lower body appeared distinct from Irish dance and from contemporary dance, as I discuss more below.

Arm movements are thus done in many varying ways, and its arguable there is no right or wrong, just what feels best to the individual. For me, and my personal practice, I enjoyed the opportunity to use my arms in a less rigid or defined way. When I took part in the Fusion Dance Fest, one of the choreographers' pieces, created by Chris, contained fairly loose, relaxed arm movements that actually felt like they helped you when you were moving the feet. Keeping the arms held in tight and shoulders back is incredibly hard when doing big jumps in the air, or moving the feet fast as in the hardshoe dances. Moving the arms is actually very helpful to make a big leap, and even just leaving the arms loose is much less tiring when doing such fast movements in the lower half of the body. Rigid arm movements did not feel natural to me, but perhaps if I had grown up doing them, they would do. It is very strange to begin moving the arms when Irish dancing, when you have spent many years not moving your arms. However, natural, loose arms did not feel strange, they felt like how the body naturally wanted to move.

Release technique, improvisation and arm movements are some of the key dance techniques which have been explored by choreographers who are being innovative with Irish dance. In their quest to create meaningful work, they have used these methods in various ways to create work that is more authentic and true to them. They have had strong individual opinions on the best way to experiment with or use these forms, illustrating how important it is to them that innovation within the dance form is done in a way that they deem appropriate. The following section considers questions of how to evaluate these new works of Irish dance and draws on my own experience of them as an audience member and reflections on them at the time and since.

Judging new works of Irish dance

It is interesting to consider how to judge these new works of Irish dance as they depart from the norms of Irish dance. For example, the virtuosity of Irish dance and the spectacle of the big shows are key factors that Irish dance shows are usually judged on. Many of these new performances may be veering from the norms of Irish dance technique on purpose and therefore appear to be dance "badly" or "incorrectly". Indeed, Breandán and Catherine both felt that you could not therefore judge these new shows on the technical norms of Irish dance. In addition, many of the performances are not concerned with spectacle, and are instead stripped back, often performed on small stage, with often only one or two performers instead of a large group, and more basic

costumes. My background as a competitive Irish dancer, very familiar with the traditional show style of Irish dance, but with little experience with viewing contemporary dance, certainly shapes my commentary on the following dance pieces.

I will first consider Breandán de Gallaí's performance *Linger*, which was arguably the most like a traditional Irish dance performance as my impression was that it was bursting with virtuosity. The performance was held at Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin in February 2017, but not in the main theatre space, instead in the banquet hall, a large space with brick walls, stained glass windows and a decorative ceiling. The amount of seating was minimal in comparison to a large show such as *Riverdance*, and the seating and floor where the dancers performed only occupied about a third of the entire room, thus keeping the performance intimate. Breandán and his dance partner, Nick O'Connell, walked onto the stage, which was not raised, from behind the audience, almost as if they were also audience members. There was no side stage, or space behind the stage where the performers could not be seen. The two men were dressed in very small black briefs. There were blocks on the floor where the two sat at various times and they started the performance by sitting on these blocks at either ends of the floor, facing the audience. There was a projected video of the two men wandering around the city, sometimes standing, or smoking, or sitting and appearing contemplative, and at other times dancing. The two began doing movements sitting on blocks at similar times or at the same time. When they stood up and moved, an artist arrived at the side of the performance floor, where the audience could see him, and he began drawing the two dancers. At one point, Breandán used a projector to project the drawing process onto the other dancer's body. At other points in the show the dancers would sit on their blocks again and sip some water while video footage was projected.

The two dancers got dressed gradually throughout the show and then undressed again gradually, so they began as they ended in the same black underwear. During the dressing and undressing, they traded their shirts several times. The contemporary movements they began with often appeared stuck, which I think was the point. They often repeated the movements. They had a movement of the arm moving out to the side and back, with a bit of a bounce, which felt like a twitch or a moment of pain. There were more obvious movements of pain and stress when one or both dancers dropped their heads down and put their hands around their heads in pain, or stress or frustration. There was clearly a lot

of expression here, the performance considered questions of identity, personal feelings and struggles.

There were moments that appeared to be solely contemporary dance or strongly influenced by contemporary dance, but much of the show was clearly Irish dance. Sometimes the Irish dance was intermixed with contemporary movements, but it was not veering strongly away from the norms of the practice. I found the Irish dancing to be really engaging and virtuosic. There was a dance within the piece that was inspired by the tango and done by the two men in Irish dance hard shoes, which was innovative and highly skilful. It was great to see the two men doing an intimate performance with each other, something that is rare within many dance forms, and in particular Irish dance. It was also exciting to see how they took the tango and brought Irish dance to it. I had never seen anything like it before. In comparison to other performances, this was very exciting on a technical level but also broke boundaries through the contemporary influence, the fact that the men did the soft shoe style of dancing that men don't perform in shows, and the emotional expression within the performance.

However, I sometimes struggled to enjoy some of the performances of new versions of Irish dance. When I watched a video of Kristyn Fontanella's performance *In Limbo* which was performed at *Dance Limerick* [a dance research and performance space in Limerick, Ireland] in September 2016, there were several times where I lost interest. The dancers were dressed in grey and black, loose trousers and tops. It was a very contemporary looking aesthetic. The stage was not raised above the audience, there were live musicians and the lighting often changed, from darker to brighter and focused on certain points. The dancers walked for three minutes at the beginning of the performance. Then one dancer stopped and clicked their fingers, the walking continued, then about 50 seconds later four people stopped and clicked their fingers. Again, the walking continued, then four and half minutes in, all the dancers stopped and clicked their fingers besides one. At about five minutes in, the lights went down and everything stopped for about 30 seconds. The walking, which went on for quite a while, was difficult to enjoy or sustain interest in.

Then, between minutes five to seven there was an interesting range of rhythms with stomps, trebles (a standard movement in hard shoes but this was done barefoot), finger

clicking, and clapping on the body. The feet were often parallel, and the walking continued but it was interspersed with the dancers making rhythm with their feet or hands. And the walking now had more of a rhythm, and pace. Many of the movements were drawn from Irish dance but sometimes done differently, for example without crossed feet and without shoes. There was another pause at about 11 minutes in when everyone stopped moving for about 30 or 40 seconds. Then the group ran together and then hopped and stomped. At one point, one dancer did a solo which looked a bit chaotic, it definitely didn't resemble Irish dance, while all of the other dancers drummed a rhythm with their feet which steadily increased in speed.

Then at the end there was a soft shoe piece which I enjoyed. It felt like it existed in a space in between contemporary and Irish dance, and indeed this was the intention of the show, with its name 'In Limbo'. The dance itself was done to reel music, and the movements fitted the music perfectly as in Irish dance. There were skips, running and stomping and a tilting of the torso diagonally, and a twisting with the arms moving. The dancers also moved backwards which is more rare in soft shoe Irish dance. It's arguable that the focus on rhythm, the lightness and connection to music were what made this Irish dance, but the movements were often different and appeared more free and less rigid with the arms and torso moving in different ways and the legs are not rigidly straight and over crossed.

The performance was about 20 minutes in total, and a lot of it included the dancers walking around which I struggled to enjoy, perhaps thus feeling awkward and uncomfortable or 'in limbo' as the name intended. Interspersed, were interesting moments of dancing which were intriguing. I appreciated the performance for its innovation, and it's willingness to break boundaries, but I think I would have enjoyed it more if it had been shorter and cut out some of the walking. But, arguably that is the point, where the performance is less about pleasing or merely entertaining the viewer, and more about sharing something meaningful, that perhaps is not always easy watching. Some choreographers want to create more provocative and challenging work rather than provide a straightforwardly enjoyable experience for the audience.

I saw Jean Butler's performance *This is an Irish dance* in February 2017 in Dublin, and it also felt unusual and challenging. The performance was in a very small space, it was not

grand or impressive, and the stage was not raised above the audience. I found the intimacy of the space uncomfortable. At times, it felt like you could not move a muscle, as it was so quiet. I wrote in my notes: "Could see the sweat on her back. Could hear her breath." Jean was performing with a cello player and the performance considered their interaction. It was quite a theatrical performance with the two of them often staring at each other for long times, or moving uncomfortably close into each other's space. At one point near the end she took the musician's instrument and played it while he looked away. It felt as though the audience was peering onto something that perhaps we shouldn't.

Her movements didn't appear to resemble Irish dance in any way, but I could see how they would be doable as an Irish dancer. She had fairly straight legs like an Irish dancer usually has, not bent like they often have in contemporary and I wrote in my notes that she didn't seem to make many shapes like contemporary dancers make. She had footwork and legwork which would be something Irish dancers are used to, but she also had lots of intricate arm work. She moved the arms quickly in various shapes, so quickly that they began to look blurred. Her feet were often parallel, which would be a more contemporary aesthetic, but she had moments of turned out feet and crossed legs, thus moments of those Irish dance norms coming through. At times she made noises with her feet and hands, different sounds depending on what parts of her feet or hands she banged or tapped on the floor. Sometimes the musician matched these sounds with his instrument, again potentially drawing out the rhythm of Irish dance and the connection within Irish dance between the music and the dance, the musicians and the dancers. I noted that at times her movements appeared ugly, or not traditionally graceful, and at times I imagined how the movements could feel freeing. She had moments at the beginning of the performance that included animal like moving of her shoulders and arms. You could see her upper back and it was like she was intending her arms to be an animal's wings. She veered between over hunched shoulders and then incredibly arched, exploring the movement potential of the shoulders. At another moment, there was a feeling of Latin dancing, as she rolled her hips. Overall the movements did not resemble Irish dance or contemporary dance, it was as if she was exploring something entirely different. The movements were interesting and different, but perhaps not virtuostic in the traditional sense.

Performances like those by Up & Over It and Marie Clerkin's *The Bad Arm* were similar in that they were comedy shows as much as they were dance performances. They discussed and questioned a range of issues such as the competitive Irish dance norms, the Irish dance show norms, Irishness and Irish culture. They were accessible, funny and enjoyable, but serious in their quest to shine light on various issues.

A video Up & Over It created called *Alles Gut Zum St Patrick's Tag* clearly mocks the Irish dance world and Riverdance. In the video, two robot dancers wheeled out to perform for St Patrick's Day in costumes resembling those in *Riverdance*. The owner turns them on and they dance in the *Riverdance* style. In another scene they are handcuffed, sat in front of a blackboard and the owner is teaching them. At another part, the female dancer is seen practicing the stereotypical feminine movements of the lead female dancer in *Riverdance* while the male dance practices the stereotypical masculine movements of the lead male dancer in *Riverdance*. Then towards the middle of the video the robot dancers appear to be broken and deviate from their norm and dance steps that are clearly not the Irish dance norm – their arms are moving freely and feet movements more resemble tap dance than Irish dance. Through this video *Up & Over It* are clearly arguing that Irish dancers are moulded and shaped to move in a certain gendered and restricted way, and they exist in a world without freedom of thought or movement.

Marie Clerkin's show *The Bad Arm*, also addressed the rigidity and restrictions of competitive Irish dance. In this show she explored the world of Irish dance and questions of Irishness from the perspective of the daughter of an important Irish dance teacher and someone who was Irish in London, and how these aspects of her identity affected her. I saw Marie Clerkin's show *The Bad Arm* in a small theatre in London in August 2017. Marie told the audience that she was born and raised in London, England to Irish parents. In England she was seen by others as Irish, but in Ireland, she was seen as English. She recounted a story of going to a job agency in London and the difficulty the woman working there had with pronouncing her name because it was Irish. The woman then said to her, "We'll call you by your middle name instead." Thus she was seen as an outsider because of her Irishness in England. But when she went to Ireland in the summers to cousins and family, they would laugh that she was English doing Irish dance. So she illustrated the difficulty of being seen as not Irish enough by some, and not English enough by others, but instead existing somewhere in between. She spoke of her

identity as the daughter of an Irish dance teacher; her mother was the head of a big and significant Irish dance school, and she felt that she was fighting for her mother's attention against all of the other more talented dancers. She felt her mother ensured that she did not favour her in any way. She said her mother made her share her dress with the other girls who couldn't afford one, and how her mother didn't put her in the team dance but instead put her in a smaller group dance with "the other rejects". She said that while her mother might kiss a dancer who did well on her forehead, Maire was constantly trying to get her attention, and instead her mother would tell her to pull in her "bad arm". In a range of subtle ways she touched on some Irish dance norms which create division such as having the expensive dress, and being seen as a 'skilled' dancer.

She also overtly questioned the norms of the movements of Irish dance. She spoke about the difficulty of dancing with arms pulled in tight and "back ram rod straight" while having to jump high in the air. She felt that Irish dance was a "repressed" dance style in comparison to the freedom of disco dancing, moving your arms, wiggling your hips and swaying with the music; she illustrated this by showing the audience how she used to disco dance. However when she Irish danced in the show it was in the traditional competitive way. She was not doing new or contemporary movements.

Some themes arose through interviews concerning how to judge these new forms of Irish dance. Catherine Foley spoke about the importance of assessing a performance based on the intentionality of the choreographer. Therefore, you could assess a work based on whether technique was purposely being done differently or praise the technique and the virtuosity if that appeared to be the aim. Kristyn spoke about judging the quality of a performance in terms of whether it appeared to be fusion, which was seen as not as good, in comparison to something "pure" and original. However, she mentioned that this also has a lot to do with personal taste. In comparison, Breandán spoke about the importance of not saying that a performance was good or bad, but saying what you liked or disliked. This seemed to be an ideal way to discuss these new types of Irish dance, acknowledging that the enjoyment of them is personal taste and that there is not an overall ruling on what makes a good or bad performance. The following section considers the choreographers' perspectives on how they are viewed by the wider public.

Audience reactions

Irish dance shows like *Riverdance*, and its spinoffs, have been incredibly successful with audiences around the world. But how do the public feel about these new forms of Irish dance which depart so drastically from how they're used to seeing Irish dance presented? According to my interviewees, the perception of audience's reactions was that some people were supportive and liked these new forms of Irish dance, some disliked them, and some were indifferent. Catherine Foley believes that many, who had likely been competitive dancers, love Irish dance as it is and do not want to see it changed. She reflected: "And they live for competition and they live for watching that technique and watching a great Irish dancer who actually excels at this technique, mastering it. And that's what they love. Now they might see sometimes, what other people are doing with that tampering with it, they mightn't like that."

Indeed, many of the competitive Irish dancers at the Fusion Dance Fest in August 2016 questioned the choreography of Kristyn Fontanella's piece which was strongly influenced by contemporary dance. To them, moments in the choreography like sitting on the floor and rocking side to side was not Irish dance. Breandán and Peter also reflected on how they, and Marie Clerkin, had performances running alongside the World Championships one year and none of the competitive dancers went to see their performances. Breandán's dancers were giving out leaflets at the World Championships advertising their show to competitive dancers, including their friends, and the competitive dancers were handing back the leaflets. To Peter, competitive dancers are not interested in anything beyond their world:

> It was like they're so much a part of their own world and so, dare I say, incestuous and just snake eating its own tale almost, you know these £2000 costumes and dancers becoming teachers, becoming dancers becoming teachers you know, that they just don't care what's happening around them unless it's a big show with lots of lights and they can you know bring the whole school along to. But they don't want it to mean more I don't think.

Kieran echoed these comments about the Irish dance community having "tunnel vision". She did not feel that they disliked others work, but just that it didn't concern

them. She reflected: "…Not necessarily that what someone else is doing is a bad thing, but it's just not relevant to what they're doing. So I actually don't see a lot of interest there you know."

It's possible that competitive Irish dancers will not be interested in this work unless it becomes more mainstream, or it becomes a viable avenue for them to pursue as a career. Peter felt that the competitive community of dancers were not interested in what he and Suzanne were doing until they became relatively "famous":

> Irish dancing loves success, the whole community, so if you have the best dress on in a competition, if you are winning Worlds and everyone knows your name and everyone wants to know you and if you're the best school or whatever. So it wasn't until we did a video that went viral and then we did a McDonald's commercial and we did a few other things, it wasn't until we did those things that people started to pay attention. You know and then we went to the World Championships, people wanted us to perform at it and people were asking us for autographs which was really weird.

Despite the competitive dancers' interest or appreciation in fellow dancers' fame, they were not interested in seeing their performance outside of the World Championship setting. This illustrates how clearly they were solely focused on being wrapped up in that one event. Another one of the interviewees reflected on how some Irish dance teachers' reacted negatively to their new work:

> There were three local Irish dance teachers/ adjudicators who came and it was a post show chat and they kind of just basically sat with their arms folded even just slightly skitting at the language that was used in the post show chat, and then just kind of put up their hands and saying "well we didn't know what was going on, we didn't know whether we could applaud after you danced or you didn't, and it just seemed too artistic for us, like something you'd see in New York or something" that was literally what they said. And the best line was "we were just waiting here for you to do some proper dancing". What's proper

dancing, is that the stuff you teach on a Wednesday night? You know.
But that was maybe a minority.

This is very significant, illustrating how some from the Irish dance world may potentially react to these new forms of Irish dance which venture more into a contemporary or artistic realm. These teachers appeared to strongly dislike what they perceived as a rejection of the traditional dance form, especially by someone who has become famous for excelling in the form as it is. Clearly amidst the competitive Irish dance community there is a struggle to understand why anyone would change the dance form, unless it is in a way to make it more exciting, or place it on a bigger stage.

The opinions of the wider public seem more difficult to ascertain. Kieran argued that newer blended forms of Irish dance might be quite accessible to the public, as it would combine something they recognise, like contemporary dance, with Irish dance, which they might not be so familiar with. She also believed that the public would be open to the creativity. However she also thought: "People do seem to have very preconceived notions of what Irish dance is so if you're doing anything that veers away from that, whether it's sean-nós or a contemporary new exploration people do seem to kind of go "what's that?" Leighann also spoke about how during performances around St. Patrick's Day, which are catering to an audience who expect to see Irish dance in its usual form, sometimes they have audiences that are disappointed that her dancers don't have wigs on and competition dresses. She felt that in the wider dance world beyond Irish dance the audiences' reaction was more positive. She said: "I don't think there's ever questions like, 'hey I missed the wig, where is the wig?' It's more like 'What was that? I've never seen Irish dance that way, that was really beautiful', so it's actually more positive when we're presenting to a larger dance audience."

When I saw Jean Butler's performance of *This is an Irish Dance* I listened to some of the audience members talking to each other after it was over. One man said he would have liked her to interact or engage more with the audience. I thought it was interesting that he brought this up, as it's precisely what contemporary dance is often veering away from, that is entertaining the audience and serving them. The contemporary performance is often much more concerned with sharing what the artist deems important, regardless of whether it is easy entertainment or pleasurable viewing. Other people praised Jean's

intricate movements and noted that you would have seen any hesitation or nervousness in the body, as we were so close.

It is highly likely that the opinions of the public viewing these works varies widely, depending on what their expectations are of "Irish dance". As already stated, it's likely that seeing a more contemporary or different style of Irish dance would not be favoured by an audience expecting to see a *Riverdance* style performance. Meanwhile others, who may be put off by the idea of "Irish dance" in its *Riverdance* style, may be pleasantly surprised to see it presented differently. Catherine said: "I think it depends on what you do with it and who you are and how good that work is, if it's good they'll come."

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the many forms and styles of new types of Irish dance. I have found that choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance desire for their work to be seen as a dance and not as 'Irish dance', in order to not be bound by the meanings and expectations that the term 'Irish dance' can hold. They have rejected the norms of *Riverdance*, the stereotypical notions of Irishness in that show and others like it, and are instead creating smaller, stripped back shows which are focused on expression and issues that they want to explore. This turn towards alternative forms has transformed these choreographers from skilled and talented entertainers, to artists who seek to move audiences with particular messages, stories, or feelings to share.

Choreographers have been strongly influenced by contemporary dance, and particular techniques such as release technique, improvisation, and ways of bringing in upper body movement have been important considerations to the choreographers when creating their new works. It is significant that these techniques are in direct contrast to the norms of competitive and show Irish dance. Release technique is the opposite of the Irish dance norm of rigidity in the body, improvisation is the antithesis of the perfect execution of choreographed Irish dance steps and choreographers' opinions on the 'right' way to incorporate arm movements was contrasted to what they saw as the 'wrong' way – the arm movements in *Riverdance*. Thus it could be argued that choreographers are prioritising moving their bodies in ways that are the opposite of how they have been strictly trained to move. But it is also possible that their preferences are a return to a more relaxed style of Irish dance, a style that existed prior to the standardisation of Irish

dance. Thus while creating contemporary and new versions of Irish dance, it is possible that, in some ways, they are actually returning to a more "traditional" form of Irish dance.

To evaluate these performances of alternative forms of Irish dance, it is arguably necessary to consider the intention of the choreographer and have an understanding of the context within which they are producing their work. However, many whose primary dance training is Irish dance, may struggle to understand or appreciate the strong influence of contemporary dance within these works. Viewing these performances myself, I felt they ranged from impressive and smart, to challenging and at times uninteresting/uncomfortable to watch. The competitive Irish dancing community has largely seemed uninterested in these works because they are not displays of highly skilled Irish dance in line with *Riverdance,* which could provide them with future employment. Meanwhile, the wider public's perceptions likely vary depending on their expectations of these new forms of 'Irish dance' and their wider dance knowledge. The next chapter turns away from performances to look at Irish dance schools, some of the concerning norms of the Irish dancing community and how Irish dance could be taught differently.

Chapter 6

Irish dance teaching: new approaches, challenges and possibilities

Introduction

Becoming an Irish dancer has typically involved joining a world of constant competition, conforming to a particular style, wearing the 'correct' glitzy and expensive dress, and submitting one's body to arduous training in a dance environment where teachers expect nothing less than perfection. As my research has shown, choreographers are innovating within and beyond the Irish dance tradition. Their novel work and influence is also being realised in some Irish dance schools that are beginning to use new approaches in teaching Irish dance. These approaches depart from typical Irish dance teaching practices and competition focused outcomes; they are more attentive to the mental and physical health of children and young people and seek to incorporate and value creativity and performance within the classroom. This chapter turns attention to the classroom and alternative Irish dance teaching. Drawing on my own experience of teaching young children in this form, the chapter asks: How do innovative Irish dance choreographers view the traditional teaching of competitive Irish dance? What are the aims of alternative Irish dance schools and how do they differ from mainstream Irish step dance schools? What are the challenges and possibilities of teaching skill and technique in Irish dance while also encouraging self-expression and creativity? How might the teaching of non-competitive Irish dance shape the way in which Irish dance may develop more widely? The chapter begins by exploring some of the key issues with competitive Irish dance and the motivations for moving away from competition. The first section considers the perceived negative aspects of competitive Irish dancing: unfair judging, the ever increasing cost of costumes, injuries from lack of attention to safety, and the focus on competition to the detriment of learning more broadly about other aspects of the dance and performing. I consider whether or not the competition world is likely to change, what this would look like, and what affects it would have on Irish dance.

The following section compares the traditional Irish dance class to the contemporary dance class, examining what could be gained from applying the teaching methods and ethos of contemporary dance to an Irish dance class. This section draws strongly on my own practice-based research, referring to my participation in a range of Irish and

contemporary dance courses and classes. I then explore what it means to teach new forms of Irish dance to competitive Irish dancers. I explore the experience of teachers and choreographers such as Colin Dunne and Kristyn Fontanella who regularly teach competitive Irish dancers their own personal styles of Irish dance. While there are strong arguments for changing the practice in terms of safety, creativity, or moving in a way that feels good in one's body, competitive dancers have differing and sometimes negative reactions to this.

The chapter then turns to examine non-competitive Irish dance schools and more specifically, the skill of these dancers and whether they need competitions to motivate them, the opportunity to learn in a more welcoming environment, having the time to focus on creativity, and the question of whether this is a more traditional way to learn Irish dance. I focus on the D'amby Project in upstate New York as a case study for a non-competitive Irish dance school. The final section of this chapter explores my own practice-based research on teaching Irish dance in a local primary school in London as a way to explore teaching Irish dance in a more child sensitive, creative and positive environment, with an attention to safety. Two main overlapping themes are explored here: order and creativity.

Competition issues

Competition is central to Irish dance practice. The norms of the competitive world and how Irish dance classes are taught within that world were frequently discussed, questioned and brought up by interviewees as reasons for their effort to develop new ways to engage in Irish dance. Yet, many had conflicting feelings about the significance of competitive Irish dance, indeed Kristyn Fontanella said she had a love/hate relationship with it. She explained: "I kind of talk negatively about competition or negatively about like the way I was brought up in Irish dance world but I would never change it because I loved it so much and it has informed me for where I am right now, so yeah, it is that juxtaposition of the love/ hate relationship." This conflict is significant, illustrating how many aspects of competitive Irish dance continue despite people's dislike of them. Kristyn remembers Irish dancing as being "every weekend of her childhood", a practice through which she made best friends who are still her friends today, and how it enabled her to travel around the world. In many ways she loves the practice and the aspects that enhanced her life, but it also came with certain norms and expectations that

she, like other dancers, reluctantly accepted. Reflecting on this years later they viewed competition as a part of the tradition that they engage with, and felt that successfully making it through the struggles, had a formative effect on them.

Competition is also perceived as beneficial for the practice of Irish dance. While interviewees reflected on the cut throat nature of the competitive world, they also recognised that competition transformed Irish dance into a highly skilled practice, which justified its continuation. Peter Harding reflected on this:

> I think…I think…I think it's a horrible world, but I think without it we wouldn't have the quality of dancing that we all do. You know you look at other styles of folk dancing, I mean the reason why we're comparing Irish dancing to ballet is because Irish dancing is very advanced technically compared to Welsh dancing, clogging, other types of European folk dance. You know they've languished… because competitive Irish dancers have been pushed, and pushed and pushed and pushed into what we're doing now. So there always has to be a place for it because otherwise we'll never, you know I don't think there is enough support in the professional community to push the form as much as the competitiveness is doing. But the whole organisation is horrible and the pressure people put on young people, you know you have a 12 year old and two adults are talking above their head as if this child is the most important thing in the world, or has let them down or, you know that's a horrible aspect to it.

Like Kristyn, Peter feels that competition has improved the technicality of the dance form and produced increasingly highly skilled dancers, but simultaneously affected the dancers in negative ways. Indeed, he also feels that the positive aspects outweigh the negative aspects of competition. But for others, the advances in the dance form were advances they could not keep up with even if they wanted. Kieran Jordan mentioned how drastically Irish dancing had changed since when she was dancing as a child. She said,

> Things were changing, like I stopped competing in 1997, no, no sorry 1994, and so like toe stands were just coming into it, wigs were just coming into it, so it was really changing, before that it was a little more folky and natural. And you know so I was in college, I gained a lot of weight in college post dance and like the new suspension jumps and all that kind of stuff, I couldn't, I just couldn't, I didn't want to keep up with it and I couldn't.

Many of the interviewees who voiced conflicting feelings about the competitive world are no longer a part of it; therefore it does not directly affect them anymore. But some continue to be involved, despite their reservations. Marie Clerkin was very vocal about her dislike of many aspects of the competitive Irish dance scene, including sometimes unfair judging, yet she is still very involved with the competitive scene as a judge, frequently judging competitions in the US, where she lives. She said:

> Yes, yeah I am part of it, I know that there's a lot of rigging, a lot of shenanigans that goes on, that people look after their friends' dancers and they look out for this one because it's the world champion and you mustn't miss her and all of that but there are lots of us who are honest and sometimes it's a bit of a hard job, sometimes you have to see your close friends and you've just given their dancer a really low mark and they can't believe that you've done that, but that's what you do. So yeah I feel it's important for the integrity of Irish dancing that you have people who sit down and do an honest day's judging. But yes I do feel, I feel, I feel like no, I should stay, the cheats should go, why should I go?

Importantly, Marie perceives that her involvement as a judge is improving Irish dance. Rather than avoid being a part of it because she dislikes how it operates, she is trying to hold herself to a higher standard than others, to be an honest judge and therefore change an aspect of the practice from within. In our discussions she also recounted how in one of her shows, she sheds light on the rigging that occurs within competitive Irish dance. Thus, cheating and bias within competition judging was clearly something that troubled her, and that she sought to change and challenge in different ways.

The dancers' costume norms are another aspect of competition that my interviewees disliked. The expectation that dancers wear dresses that cost thousands of pounds, wigs that are uncomfortable, fake tan, and heavy makeup was usually seen as unnecessary and ridiculous. The practice of Irish dance has become synonymous with this 'look' and outside of the dance world it has acquired a reputation as a kitsch and strange phenomenon. Many interviewees felt it overshadows the dance itself and the skill of the dancers. Indeed Marie reflected:

> I feel that it's over the top, you know the wigs and the tan and the very expensive dresses, although to some they may look amazing, you know I'm judging competitions most weekends these days, and I think they detract from the skill. If you look at them, you don't take them seriously, you just think wow all of that, wow amazing and they can skip around stage. No, they can do really intricate rhythms with amazing elevation and style but that's sort of lost I think when they're dressed the way they're dressed.

Likewise, Catherine Foley disliked the costume norms which had transformed since she was a child. She perceives them as a distraction and would prefer a simpler style because she "wants to see the dancer as opposed to the outfit". For Catherine, it would be more appealing if dancers could wear an outfit that was "light to move in" and "flattering to a dancer", "without it being all this money and the weight of these costumes". Likewise, Breandán de Gallaí disliked what he called the "pageantry look", but defended those who liked it. He said, "They're still people who value things in different ways" thus respecting the perspectives of others. Yet, he was concerned that the look might be exploitative through being sexualized or discriminatory, where people cannot afford it, and felt this was a reason for change. Thus most interviewees were critical of the costume norms and wanted to see change in this aspect of the practice for different reasons.

Attitudes towards safety were another issue within competitive Irish dance that some interviewees felt was in need of change. The norms of the Irish dance style mean that safety is often overlooked in favour of aesthetics and technical virtuosity. Erin Hayes, an Irish dance teacher and Dance Science Masters graduate, has undertaken extensive

research on the damage of landing high suspension jumps on the ball of the foot with a straight leg, as is the norm in Irish dance. She said that in the ballet world this would be seen as crazy, as dancers are trained to land jumps with a bent leg and lowering the heel, so that the impact of the jump is absorbed better.

Erin herself ended up with metal rods in her shins from dancing through the pain of shin splints which can be brought on for a variety of reasons including age, hard non-sprung floors, skeletal factors such as ankles that roll in and do not absorb impact well, and Irish dance itself which is very bad for dancers' legs. When the same dances and the same moves are practised over and over again, every night at class, this impact becomes worse. Indeed, I suffered greatly from shin splints when I returned to Irish dance in undertaking this research, though I had not suffered from when dancing as a child or young teen. In the competitive Irish dance school I joined in 2015, I was dancing on a carpeted floor, likely over a cement ground, in a local community center, so there was definitely not any spring in the floor to assist with impact. I was also dancing two-hour classes on Tuesday and Thursday evening. Two hours was far too long for my legs, and only having one day in between did not leave enough time to recover. I tried everything: compression socks, kiniseoloy tape, icing, foam rolling, new soft shoes that were supposed to absorb impact, I worked on trying to build glute strength, all of which may have helped slightly, but above all I needed to dance for shorter sessions, with a longer period of time in between the sessions. And dancing on a better floor did seem to help too. However, my teachers were ignorant in this area, to the extent that they simply told me to rub some deep heat on my shins, or when I stopped, told me to get up and try again after a break. I reached the stage where just walking was incredibly painful, let alone trying to dance. Finally, I had no choice but to reduce the number of classes I went to, as it was the only way to lessen the pain in my legs.

An awareness of issues of safety would certainly be beneficial to dancers. If big suspension jumps and landing with a straight leg onto the ball of the foot were not the norm, then many dancers would likely suffer far less injuries. Marie argued that schools are more interested in safety or proper training now, saying "No that's starting to change now so a lot of schools now bring in you know cross fit trainers and you know they'll have a pilates instructor once a week working with the dancers or they'll have somebody teaching them stretches or yoga moves and now it is taken more seriously because

people notice the effects, the results." However, it seems apparent that competitive schools are only interested in work that helps them to win, that produces stronger or more flexible dancers because this is desired in competition.

Competitive Irish dance strongly focuses on training the dancers to win competitions, meaning there is little time to focus on anything else such as proper warm ups and cool downs, safety, greater knowledge of music, or creativity. Kristyn would love to see more time for creativity in the competitive Irish dance class. She reflected on this:

> So yeah it depends on if the person or if the school, the teachers, really encourage the kids to create. I think that's one thing I would love to change, is the Irish dance teachers of today if they just give the kids like half an hour to create on their own. Like when I was growing up I never made anything up you know. And kids are so friggen creative, sorry kids are so creative that it's like an untapped resource you know and also it's just healthy, I think. So yeah I would encourage Irish dance teachers to let their students create, go and try other things. …I was fortunate enough to have all these other dance forms and training so I was opened up in the arts world to other spectrums so it would just be really great to see that happen for the next generation.

While it would be a valuable way to encourage children and teens' creativity, it is unlikely that competitive dance teachers would want to take regular time out of their training for competitions, to instead allow their dancers to play and be creative. Indeed, Colin Dunne argued that introducing creativity into the current competitive system would be very difficult. He explained:

> I think it would be hard to go into that cycle and start talking about creativity or improvisation because people would only be interested in creativity if they thought it was going to get them a higher place or it was going to teach them a few new moves that nobody else had which would only last for about one feis because if the move was

> good and if that person won with the move then everybody would start doing the move anyway so.

The focus on competitions, means there are only a few times that young dancers usually dance in front of an audience without it being part of a competition. Kieran spoke about not enjoying competing as a child, but feeling much more joy when she had the chance to perform. She said:

> I did not feel happy in competition, I just didn't and as a young, like as a child you don't really know why, you don't know what you're missing or what else might be out there. But I didn't come alive in competition, and then when we would do little performances like the nursing homes and the parades, all that kind of stuff, I would come alive, so I just wanted to follow that.

Indeed, I also felt the joy of performing more than competing. When I first began competing, I did enjoy it, and it was fun to win medals, spend time with friends, and travel to different places for the competition. But the stakes were much lower when I was just beginning. As I moved through the levels and reached the highest, and began competing at bigger competitions, regionals and nationals, the pressure became greater. We would prepare for these competitions for 4 to 6 months, and all of the hard work that you put in to prepare could be wasted in the two minutes you have up on stage when you mess up because of nerves. So performing became much more enjoyable to me. However, we did not often get the chance to perform, usually it was around St Patrick's Day, sometimes at local festivals or in pubs, once on the news. It was much more fun to perform without the worries of being judged on every little move; instead we felt happy knowing that no one would know if we messed up or not. At Blas, the summer school for Irish dance and music at the University of Limerick, Colin Dunne made reference to Irish dancers and "our issues with messing up", talking about how it is ingrained in our psyche from years of learning set steps and having to do them perfectly for judges at a competition. This resonated strongly with me. Indeed, in my return to Irish dance I felt myself doing the steps perfectly, but when someone wanted to film what I was doing, or if I was dancing for a particularly challenging teacher, I might mess up under the pressure. Those feelings of worry at being seen to make a mistake would be

overwhelming, and my feet failed to do what I knew they could do, just a moment before.

I asked interviewees whether they thought the competitive world was likely to change to rectify some of these issues, or whether they thought it would always exist. Largely, the interviewees struggled to see how it would change. Maire felt it would be difficult to change because of how it is set up. She said:

> I feel that there's such a huge world now of, the way its structured, the whole set up of there's this major, then this major, then this qualifying round then these really expensive dresses and these really expensive wigs and there are whole industries and they all, its an infrastructure now. So it feels like I can't really go into the church and turn the tables upside down so to speak. I think what will happen, what needs to happen I believe will happen is that people will set up non- competitive Irish dance schools for performance or just for fun, I think that will happen.

Maire went on to say that she thought the competitive would exist for some time to come, but "I think that there will be another show in town, it won't be the only one. And the other show in town will be non-competitive but it will be performance or art oriented I think." So for Maire, she felt that there would be other schools and Irish dance scenes developing alongside the competitive scene. Indeed, this is arguably what is happening on a very small scale at the moment with alternative choreographers and teachers of Irish dance. But she imagined the competitive world as it is would still exist for a while to come.

Catherine Foley also struggled to see how the competitive world would change. She referred to how entrenched the commercialisation of the practice had become and the livelihoods that depended on it. She explained how many companies are invested in the competition scene, including wig makers, shoe makers, sock makers, dressmakers, and more, and that people would not want to see those business owners lose their living. She argued that any changes to the scene would have to come from people who were on the

An Coimisiún Le Rincí Gaelacha board and she felt they needed to take a step back and rethink what is important.

> It's going in a particular direction in competition culture that many people would say, and I'm not the only person saying this, many people in the organization think it has gone over the top, that's the word they use because of the way that young kids are dressed. And then you call that Irish dancing you see so you wonder what's Irish about that?

Catherine went on to say that for many people in the world, the words 'Irish dance' bring to mind the costumes and the wigs, instead of the dance itself. She is saddened that Irish dance is presented and represented this way because it detracts from the dance, which is "where the mastery is". She felt that some changes would eventually happen but that it depended on who was invested in these changes.

> As I said they have a responsibility, these people who sit around the table have a responsibility to the form to the dance itself and what they want for the next 50 years. You know, how do we want to see it develop? And I think that's an important question.

Thus to Catherine there are many within the organization who dislike how it has become but whether or not they do anything to change it remains to be seen. Perhaps the significant amount of money that is invested in it by many businesses means it would be very difficult to get rid of the wigs, or create less expensive dresses. So many businesses would no longer exist if the appearance was changed dramatically. As these businesses sell their products at competitions, and they rely on the regular occurrence of competitions to create demand for their products. Colin Dunne spoke about the competitive Irish dance scene as seeming "self sustaining in this kind of unhealthy cycle of competitions and it feels manic now that I'm on the outside, maybe it always was, but it feels manic":

> A lot of people who are in the current world of Irish dance, whenever I see them or have a conversation or if I say 'oh the World

> Championship is coming up' you know their eyebrows go up, they toss their head in the air, they give a huge sigh, they say they're dreading it, you know they talk about probably half the results are already decided, they talk about how toxic the scene is, how tired they are, how tired the kids are, there's no time for a break and it's like 'you're the people who run this thing, figure it out'.

Clearly there are many who feel overwhelmed and weary with the scene as it currently exists, but is it likely to change in the future? Perhaps, as Maire argued, changes will come in the form of new Irish dance scenes, created by those who used to be a part of the competitive scene, but want to explore alternatives. Many innovative choreographers and teachers have been influenced by contemporary dance, not just the movements, but the ethos behind the style and the way that the style is taught. The following section considers teaching practice, and the differences between how a competitive Irish dance class is taught compared to a contemporary dance class. I ask what can be learned from the teaching methods of contemporary dance.

Irish dance class versus contemporary class

In order to explore the differences between an Irish dance class and a contemporary dance class, I participated in two separate courses in contemporary dance and compared their teaching practices to the variety of Irish dance training I did prior to and during this research. The immediate difference I observed between contemporary and Irish dance classes are the warm ups. The Irish dance class traditionally dedicates very little time to a warm up, if it exists at all. Rather, Irish dance classes often go straight into strong drills where technique is expected to be perfect, without any light stretching or easing the body into the movements. This was my experience both in the competitive schools I danced in as a child and a teen, and the competitive school I joined as part of my research. Indeed, Colin Dunne also spoke of the lack of a warm up in a traditional Irish dance class, saying how he would dance around to try and get warm enough to eventually dance "properly". This compared with the two contemporary courses I joined as part of my research where warmups were an important part of the class, which were never missed. Each class would begin by walking around the room, and then we would gradually increase the speed of our walking, slowly moving more of the body. In the competitive Irish dance school I joined in London, I would take time to stretch before, and sometimes I would not work

as hard in the drills or stop if I needed to, as they often made my calves cramp up from just working too hard, too fast. The other kids in the class often questioned what I was doing and why I was doing it. Easing into the practice was not something they were used to nor felt they could do within the hierarchical class environment.

Another aspect of the Irish dance class atmosphere which distinguishes it from the contemporary class is the feeling of chaos. The contemporary dance class has never felt chaotic to me. Even at the beginning when we would be walking in different directions and increasing the pace to almost a run, we would still be working on the same movement as a group. The Irish dance class can often be a busy, noisy class comprising up to 30 students from a wide range of levels and ages all working on their own steps in a section of the room with their hardshoes. At various points they go and perform their dance in front of the teacher, who is often shouting as she or he watches the dancers. Colin echoed this:

> I suppose even the atmosphere around an Irish dance class is quite frenetic, you know there's quite a lot of people there and there's noise and sound, and different people practicing different things in different corners of the room and invariably a teacher at the head of the class kind of shouting at dancers you know, shouting not necessarily in an aggressive way but shouting because of the nature of what the dance is. I mean I find even myself when I'm still teaching Irish dance now, when you've got like 20 people in a room with shoes on and you're teaching something which is quite rhythmic and robust in a rhythmical way, your speech pattern becomes quite adamant (laughed) and repetitive and so by the end of the class even though you're still in good humour, you can sound really quite animated.

Unlike Colin, I feel that the shouting is often aggressive. It seems to be the norm to shout corrections and constantly yell that the dance is 'not good enough', is 'not sharp enough', or simply is 'not done right'; the corrections are endless. Some are particularly impatient. While at the Fusion Dance Fest, one of my teachers was very domineering. He taught very quickly and expected everyone to pick up the steps, or dances, straight away. He did not give anyone time to go slowly or process the steps. Later in the week as we

were practicing the steps he would shout, "first step" and expect it to be danced straight away, followed by a shout of "second step" and so on. Most of the other teachers would say "what's our first step" and someone would dance it, whoever remembered, and then we would all do it. With this teacher, he was drilling, and this was at a time when we were still struggling to remember the dances, let alone the order of them. One young girl said to me she thought he was "the devil in human form". While another said the people at her dance school think her teacher is hard, but they should try this teacher, as "he's actually hard". Virtually all the dancers felt quite stressed by this teacher's approach. One day, myself and other dancers were taken out of his class for a costume fitting, and my fellow dancers commented how they were happy to get out of his class for any reason. This teacher may have been an extreme case, but he is nonetheless part of a wider culture of teachers that are often impatient and unforgiving with their students, routinely shouting, and unappreciative of their efforts.

I found his classes very stressful. On the first day, I was struggling to pick up the dances. I am often slow to pick up new steps, as I worry that I will be slow and then I make it more difficult for myself to learn. So at the time I felt like I was stupid and got annoyed with myself for not picking up the steps. I felt that his attitude did not help; he was abrupt and would teach quickly, expecting you to master the step immediately. On the night of the first day I worked on his steps and was eager to make up for what I felt was a poor performance by me in his class. However, when we arrived in his session on the next day, he said he did not have time to go over them and we needed to move on and learn new steps. I was disappointed that I could not prove to him what I was capable of.

I was somewhat more confident in this second session, the steps were a bit more varied, which made them easier to pick up. But while I could learn a step at the time, it was difficult to recall the first step learnt just an hour before, let alone remember all nine different dances from both days and their order, which became even more of an issue on the third day. Many steps had the same movements which would be followed up with a different movement, so it was very easy to mess them up if you were not constantly thinking about which one you were on and what was coming next. By the third day of the week he was saying: "I've showed you it, now it's up to you, this is on you to go home and work on it". I was angry that we were being told each day to remember to work hard when we already were, and to go home each night and go through our steps

and learn them or risk being pulled from the show. We began adding very minor arm movements into this choreography but when you are focusing intensely on doing the right steps it was easy to forget them and I was the recipient of his glare once or twice when I forgot the arm movement. On the day before the performance, he was shouting at our group that everyone was dancing too fast and not in time to the music. I could hear that everyone was dancing too fast and I was dancing slower but it is difficult to do when the entire group is dancing faster. I disliked it that he was blaming the entire group for dancing too fast when for the majority of the week we had practised without music and he had taught us to dance the steps very quickly, yet the music was surprisingly slow.

As a child it is extremely difficult to stand up to abusive teaching styles, such as shouting, aggression or teachers who are simply mean in nature. Even as an adult, I found it difficult. In the classroom setting alongside other children it was hard for me not to revert back to being a child. I made a mental note to stand up for myself or say something when I felt it was appropriate. Indeed with another teacher at the Fusion Dance Fest, Chris, we were rehearsing the choreography and he had someone else take us through it and that person made a decision regarding the choreography that I followed out in rehearsal. However, Chris was unaware of this direction and said to me in an accusing way, "what are you doing just standing there?" And at this point I spoke up and said the other teacher had told me to move on a certain count in the music and it had not yet been reached. I was doing everything right and yet still being questioned. I was happy I spoke up for myself. Another day back in London, I had had a particularly difficult day, and knowing that I would likely be heavily criticised in the classroom, I did not feel emotionally strong enough to attend a class at the Michael Flatley Dance Academy. So, I decided not to go. As I child I would not have been able to make that kind of decision. And yet, why should any child have to learn dance in a humiliating and intimidating environment?

The teaching of show dance can replicate these problematic aspects of competitive dance teaching. The non-competitive Michael Flatley Dance Academy class was held in a small church hall that was also used by children, and adjacent to an outdoor play area with a sandpit. Consequently children often inadvertently brought in sand from outside, which made the floor slippery. I often slipped in my soft shoes and chose to wear my trainers instead, a decision I made a few times while I was there. Again, for children, asserting

this kind of autonomy it far more difficult if not impossible, especially when the teacher insists you wear dance shoes. I felt a sense of annoyance from the teachers a couple of times when they questioned my actions, and I had to explain that was wearing my trainers because it was too slippery.

Most people who attend dance classes are already prepared to work hard, so it is particularly difficult to receive negative feedback that challenges one's commitment. In my research diary I noted a night at the Michael Flatley Dance Academy where I was unsure whether the teacher was in a bad mood, but she shouted as I was dancing to point my toes, "they're sloppy tonight". In my diary I wrote: "possibly my shoes make it look like I'm not pointing? Possibly the slippery floor made me dance funny?" Clearly I did not understand why she thought they were sloppy when that was not a criticism I usually received. We also learnt new group choreography and she was shouting at me when I forgot to move into a line at a certain point. As I noted in my diary that it was "Basically with disdain, she said 'We need to get this right, come on!' " In reality, there was not any need to get this choreography right on the first night learning it. It was not for a show; it was only something we were working on in class.

Not receiving any positive feedback for hard work and effort can be equally as bad as receiving negative feedback expressed angrily. One of the teachers at the Fusion Dance Fest, Chris was quite relaxed at the beginning of the week but became more stressed around Wednesday as he started choreographing the piece as a whole and this stress was passed on to us as dancers. He added new steps and changed ones that we had already learnt. He told us that we needed to learn everything and that if we did not memorise the steps they would have to pull us out of the show, after all this was a professional show that people were paying to view. This felt quite threatening and added to our stress. Many of the steps were repeated but followed up by different steps each time and it was easy to get confused. By Friday we still could not remember the entire piece so Chris cut out several steps at the end which I felt was the best decision. In comparison to a couple of the other teachers, Kristyn and Michael Gardiner, I never really felt that Chris was particularly happy with how we did his piece, or the work we put in. By Saturday he did say that the piece was much better than it had been a couple of days before, but he never said that what we did was good, just constantly commented on how it could be improved. I think the lack of any praise is disheartening when dancers put in so much

work to get a dance right. Video footage of the piece was never published on social media after the event, while other pieces choreographed by Chris were, and this clearly illustrated his dissatisfaction with our work, which was discouraging.

When Irish dance teachers gave positive feedback, I always made a note of this in my diary. Such actions stood out to me, first because it is rewarding to receive praise, and second because it felt like a rarity in a world of negativity. In February 2017 I wrote a diary entry about the teacher at the Michael Flatley Dance Academy: "Simona has been quite positive and in a good mood. When she is, she's nicer when you make mistakes". I noted in my diary when she complimented me, or told me something was done well or looked nice. No matter what age you are, when you are learning something new and trying to perform this, it is always nice to receive positive feedback on your efforts. This seems to be something seldom done within Irish dance. Indeed, I thought the Michael Flatley Dance Academy probably aimed to be more positive with feedback, yet as in a regular competitive class, the teachers are often quite negative. This is because they believe that dancers will always strive to work harder when they are being told that their dancing is not good enough. Clearly teachers worry that dancers will become complacent if they compliment them.

In contrast, another teacher at the Fusion Dance Fest, Kristyn, had a relaxed and pleasant teaching style. On what was for many people the most stressful day of that week, Wednesday, my group had Kristyn for our last session. We were running behind schedule that day, I was very stressed and even angry with the amount of steps we were required to learn, how they kept changing and how we were being told we needed to learn them and it was our fault if we did not achieve this. I did not want to do another session, and I think many people felt the same, but Kristyn put on some relaxing music, brought us all together for some light stretches and told us to breath. She was considerate of everyone's feelings and was really trying to help us relax. At the end of the week during a rehearsal of her piece she cried because she was so happy with how it turned out and I think everyone appreciated how she appreciated our hard work.

It was interesting that in the contemporary class the teacher asked us how various movements felt in our bodies, and whether they felt good. This was completely new to me, within Irish dance there is no consideration for how the movement feels, just how it

looks. Even if the movement feels bad it does not matter, as the priority is how it looks. It was also encouraging to receive positive feedback from the contemporary dance teacher who told us she was impressed with us all and our commitment, that we had only danced with her twice and were doing really well, and she spoke about us being graceful. At the competitive school that I joined, the teachers would often say 'good work today', or 'well done today' but it felt slightly generic and less specific. Indeed for me as well my experience was slightly different to the dancers who were actually competing. Because I was not competing, it was not necessary for the teachers to push me to the same extent. Indeed, when I was competing and part of a highly competitive school, I found it very rare to be told I had done well. This became tiring; I began to feel that whether I worked hard in between classes or not, it did not matter, as I would always receive negative feedback despite being a successful competitive dancer.

Another aspect that differentiates the Irish dance class from the contemporary class is the structure of the class. In the Irish dance class you usually have some difficult drills to 'warm up' or begin and then go straight into dancing your steps at your highest energy level. Then while there are breaks in between dancing for the teacher, you go off into a corner of the room and work on your steps on your own. In my experience, if you take too long sitting down and not dancing, a teacher will tell you to get practicing. There is a lot of autonomy in the Irish dance class, in the sense that you are responsible for practicing on your own, even when the teacher is not watching you. Whereas in the contemporary dance class, the entire group of students dance at the same time, or maybe half dances for the teacher while the other half takes a rest. But in the classes I attended, the students were always guided by the teacher; they would go from the warm up, to possibly some exercises, then a sequence, and perhaps another sequence, and a cool down. There is a particular progression through class of various tasks that the group works on. Whereas the Irish dance class does not have this progression, it is usually divided up into drills and then dancing your steps. Thus in a sense less thought goes into how the class is taught or what is taught. Indeed, Kieran explained that in her alternative approach she tries to keep the dancers continually moving when she teaches: "so it's also a workout, it's a 90 minute/75 minute movement experience." Likewise when I taught my own Irish dance class I wanted to have a variety of tasks for the dancers to progress through in the hour class. I felt this was much more work than any normal Irish dance teacher would put into a class. This is something I consider more below when discussing

my teaching practice. First however, the following section explores participants' reflections on what it is like to teach new forms of Irish dance to competitive dancers and how they react.

Teaching new forms of Irish dance to competitive dancers

There are not many choreographers who actually teach alternative forms of Irish dance to competitive Irish dancers. Perhaps this is because there is little demand for it within the competitive world, but for those that do teach them, it is valuable to explore what they teach and how dancers react. Colin Dunne teaches competitive Irish dancers to loosen up and relax, instead of maintaining the stiff, sharp and strong stance that they are usually taught. This is the opposite of what judges would be looking for in a competition, and the opposite of what would make someone a 'good' Irish dancer according to the competitive world. Therefore Colin felt that many dancers resist his style. He explained:

> I mean I meet quite a lot of resistance from dancers, or they see it… some of them at best see it as something that's maybe kind of interesting but I'm sure when they go back to their class on a Tuesday night they're going back to their muscular… you know unless they feel like they're really attacking the floor then they don't feel like they're doing it properly. Unless they feel like they're giving it 150%, then they don't feel like they're doing it right. But I would argue and I would argue this empirically (laughing), I should write a PhD, that a lot of issues with timing, a lot of issues with rhythm, a lot of issues with carriage and the body come from the muscles being held too tight.

Thus while dancers are resistant to the style because they do not feel as though they are dancing their best, he would argue that they would be dancing better if they adopted his style. However, it is likely that some dancers would indeed feel that they were not dancing properly.

While relaxing the body might help dancers to be on time and to dance with a straight but relaxed posture, it is likely that many competitive teachers would strongly disagree with this. Colin reflected on this:

> So I sometimes feel a little bit lonely in that school of thought, it feels quite niche [laughing]. There are dancers who do come back to the workshops because they've really found something in it, but I'm sure if I was to go into any one of them number of successful Irish dance schools in the world at the moment who are teaching world champions and if I started to teach them this way the teachers would probably start to freak out that I was weakening their dancers in some way by asking them to kind of release their muscles.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that many competitive teachers would agree with Colin's belief in drawing strongly on release technique when teaching Irish dance. Unless this is a proven method of winning it is unlikely to be something that appeals to them.

Another theme which is significant when considering teaching new forms of Irish dance to competitive Irish dancers is improvisation. Colin uses a structured improvisation in which dancers are told they can only use certain movements in their dance. Kristyn Fontanella who teaches Irish dancers on the undergraduate and masters courses at the University of Limerick also uses improvisation but without the dancers knowing that they are improvising, instead calling it a game. She explained:

> You say improv and people automatically shrivel up and like put their head down and don't make eye contact, they're like crap I don't want to do this. If they play a game, it's different, so I think that's just a teaching technique though. So this year I taught them some repertoire that I have and then I ask them to use that to then create their own, so use the vocabulary. So like I do with the BA Voice and Dance, take your sevens and your threes and your slams and your shuffles and I give it to you in this order but all those things are individual things so scramble that up and make something else and so they come up with some wonderful movement and then I just really encourage it just put the music on so they can't even hear themselves think. And you know I'll be watching them and I'll be like yes keep going with that, go even further with the heel swivel that you're doing right now, or think

> about the space above you, behind you, to the sides, below you, like trying to make them just think about it in a different way.

I asked Kristyn how Irish dancers take to experimenting and she said:

> It's really one on one… some won't, they like the Irish dancing that they have and they don't want to change it and that's totally acceptable and then other ones are just like oh my god you just opened up pandora's box and they can't stop and they love it, they just need a little bit of encouragement. So it's really, it's really personal to each dancer, so I have to, that's kind of hard as a choreographer, you have to kind of respect that because they are in a learning environment, it's not like they're my employees and I hired them for this job, so it's kind of like nurturing them through that to try and get them to break a little bit, to release something and then they can go back to their happy little world that they like. But yeah just to try and break them.

Kristyn's use of the term "break them" illustrates of how strongly embodied the dancers' habits are and how much it would take to get some dancers to move differently. Indeed, Kristyn taught at the Fusion Dance Fest and her contemporary dance inspired choreography included some of the dancers sitting on the floor swaying side to side and rolling on the floor, and some of the dancers I spoke to questioned the choreography and laughed at the dancers who were rolling on the floor. Many Irish dancers thus do not understand why Irish dancers would move in this way, or perhaps struggle to move in this way. Kieran mentioned that she only teaches some dancers her contemporary style. She said: "It's tough you know for step dancers that have never moved in that way." Indeed there is a sense of the difficulty of dancers who have long embodied one way of moving to try to move another way, and to even want to try moving another way when they have spent so long perfecting the way they know (Goldman, 2010). And for others it is simply difficult to create, or to imagine Irish dance in any other way. Colin thought about this:

> There seems to be this bipolar view of traditional dance, so there's competitive dancing and then there's show dancing. And a good example, I had a girl, fourth year student come in and I was working with her on a solo for her final performance and she came in and I'd never watched her before and I said do you have a sense of what you want to do for your solo and she was like no but I don't want to do like a bloody Planxty Davis, like a competitive dance, and I don't want to do some big twirly show dance slip jig. And I was like ok well you don't have to and she's like well what else is there, and I'm like well… we can just find a piece of music that you like and just make some dance to it and if you embody that dance and execute it well, that dance will just read in its own right.

Indeed this is significant as it points to the tremendous difficulty of imagining Irish dance being done differently. When one has grown up training and perfecting a dance form and being told exactly how to do every movement, it is clearly a struggle to break free of the norms, and to even contemplate changing them, as Butler has argued (2006). But teachers of non-competitive schools are tackling this as they explore how to "do" Irish dance in their own ways.

Non-competitive schools

Non-competitive Irish dance schools are a relatively new phenomenon, and their numbers are few. Operating outside of An Coimisiún or any other network, the schools can make their own rules about how they "do" Irish dance. While interviewees were broadly positive about the idea, the skill of the dancers from non-competitive schools was a key issue for them. Some of them mentioned how competition has made dancers very skilled, and thus they questioned whether non-competitive dancers would be able to dance at the same level. Others assumed that a non-competitive dance school would simply be learning to dance for 'fun' and not for any serious reason.

Breandán reiterated the issue of competition making dancers skilled and he believed that it gives them a purpose, something that he feels dancers need when learning to dance. He reflected on how Irish dancers in France love the grading scheme, a series of 12 exams which become more difficult as the dancers progress through the grades, and tests

their skill, knowledge and ability in a range of Irish dances. As of January 1st 2018, all 12 grades must be completed before a dancer can apply for the Teagascóir Coimisiúin le Rinci Gaelacha TCRG exam. Certain grades are only open to particular age groups, for example to do grade 11 a dancer has to be at least 16 years old and to do grade 12 a dancer has to be at least 17 years old. He also argued that going from a low place at a major competition to a higher place, for example from 66th to 16th place, motivates dancers. Yet he also felt that any place lower than 10th is 'rubbish', referring to the fact that it is simply too difficult to place 70 or so dancers in an order that accurately depicts who was better, and that beyond 10th place many of the dancers are of the same ability, and that those in first to tenth place would really need to stand out and be highly skilled to earn those places. Thus he believes that competitions are essential for motivating students to learn. Yet, what is motivating them is a competition system which he perceives does not accurately measure someone's skill or ability after 10th place. I would argue that many dancers are not aware that beyond 10th place they are seen as broadly of the same ability. If they did know this, I do not think many who do not place within or near the top ten would continue to work as hard, or spend as much money as they do, to improve their place each year.

Kieran teaches old style step dancing and sean nós in a non-competitive form, to teenagers and adult dancers, in Boston, Massachusetts. She said that since Boston is a very Irish place, with many people who have an Irish background or Irish interests, there has been a real appreciation for her classes as she caters to adults which most Irish dance schools do not consider. However, she also argued that non-competitive dancers are likely to be less skilled than competitive dancers:

> Yeah I think it's a valid point because just the focus of your time, how you spend your time is different and the teaching focus, you know I think one is more like training and the other is something else. Certainly like my students mostly are adults and they're not striving for competitive excellence, you know sometimes I do wish they would strive a little bit more [laughing] and maybe they wish that I would push them a little bit more too you know. It is a different focus and I don't want sloppy dancers, I don't want to be thought of that

> way as like messy technique or anything like that, but you know it's definitely not the same kind of hardcore training.

This is significant as it suggests a struggle for non-competitive schools to combine 'training' and simply learning to dance, and a tension between pushing dancers to strive for more, and letting them enjoy themselves and just learn. However, it is likely that this is more of a struggle with adult dancers, whereas children and young teens are likely to be more passionate about learning to better themselves and to be better dancers because they could see this as a potential future career. At the D'amby Project in upstate New York, Leighann Kowalsky's non-competitive Irish dance school which also trains dancers in contemporary dance, dancers' are motivated by the chance to learn, perform and potentially have a career as a dancer in the future. Leighann's youngest dancers have about six performances a year, and the older, highest level perform up to two or three times a month. These performances provide goals for the children and Leighann feels they're benefitting from gaining professional experience. While Leighann takes her school, teaching and performances seriously, it is not certain that her dancers would be taken seriously enough to join Irish dance shows when they come from this non-competitive background.

For Catherine Foley, the idea of non-competitive schools made sense financially, because Irish dance within An Comisiún is "quite expensive and some people just aren't prepared to buy into that anymore." However, she instantly thought of non-competitive schools as simply being for 'fun'. She argued:

> And that's perfect, you know and it depends what the kids want out of the school though you know. If you have a parent whose child, they want to compete in the World Championships then that's very different, they'd have to take the child to a teacher who's registered with the organization that they can go to the World Championships. But not everyone wants to take part in the World Championships, so it depends what's your agenda and what your school is. Is it to teach Irish dancing for fun, is it to teach Irish dancing to win the world championships, these are all questions that every teacher has to ask themselves.

I became quite frustrated hearing over and over from interviewees that they didn't believe the non-competitive dancers could be as skilled as competitive, or that they just saw a non-competitive school as 'fun' but not serious. I mentioned to Colin that I felt there was a stigma behind a non-competitive Irish dancer as not being talented. He agreed:

> As not having it, yeah or just a bit alternative or that they haven't really learnt it properly. Yeah I would have said 20 years ago that unless you kind of start at the age of 3 and gone through that competitive route then you're never going to have the, you're never going to acquire the technical proficiency. But I think I've nearly been proved wrong I mean even just from some of the dancers that I work with in Russia who started in their late teens and in other places in eastern Europe that I haven't taught that I've seen dancers who never competed and who have a technical proficiency, I mean maybe they're lacking a little bit of the basics, do you know what I mean, you know cause they've learnt it very quickly but they can do the flash stuff you know.

Importantly Colin recognized that he had changed his mind about this over the years. Perhaps many of the interviewees have not seen these dancers from other areas who have a high technical proficiency in Irish dance. Or perhaps they too need more time to adjust to recognizing the skill of dancers outside the competitive circuit. I asked Catherine Foley whether she thought there would be a time when you could be a serious dancer while not competing. She reflected:

> I think yeah, yes I think you can be serious in it, but you mightn't be taken seriously by people within the organization. But I think you can be taken seriously, it depends on the quality of your work and it depends what you're aspiring to. What is your mission, what is your vision for your dancers, how do you aspire to create Irish dancers according to your understanding of what Irish dance is? So I think it's shifting and moving a lot because the MA for instance here has given

> dancers opportunities now. You have choices. So you can choose to go into the organizations or not go into the organizations, you can create other work in Irish dance so it depends on the individual, you know what they think is important and what represents them as Irish dancers and what do they want to do with the skills that they have but it's up to them.

This is important as Catherine recognises that dancers today can choose to create different types of dance schools. They have more choices and opportunities to do something new, which she credits to the Masters for opening up dancers to a range of approaches to Irish dance. However, she notes that these teachers and their schools, and the dancers in their schools may not be taken seriously by those within the major Irish dance organizations. It seems apparent that if you are outside of an organisation you likely have to work harder to prove yourself, to produce high quality dancers and performances, just to be seen to be 'good', unless perhaps, you are someone who was a top dancer within the competitive world and then you left to create a dance school outside of this world. Indeed, Marie stated:

> I think that in time you would, when I say in time I don't really think it would take long before people would say you know I trained with Colin Dunne, or I trained with Ciara Sexton or I trained with Tara Barry or you know that you would have people being able to boast about who they trained with, rather than I won the World Championships, but I trained with this legend.

The debates and arguments over the skill of non-competitive dance schools are interesting when one considers that many other dance and music practices are not competitive, and yet practitioners of these forms are considered to be skilled. Colin was one interviewee who recognized that many other practices are taught in a non-competitive way. I asked him if he would imagine his potential dance school as being non-competitive and he said: "I could yeah. I mean you know in the way that lots of people learn music or learn contemporary dance."

However, Colin mentioned that when thinking of running his own classes, he asks himself practical questions such as would the kids want to compete and if they started competing, he sees this as a "really slippery slope", veering away from what he wants to do. Likewise Peter from *Up and Over It* questioned the financial viability of a non-competitive school. He felt that you'd need a hugely popular show of non-traditional Irish dance for young people to start looking for those kind of dancing schools. He said, "The reason why Irish dancing had a resurgence was because of *Riverdance* and people wanted to learn Irish dancing." But:

> If you're a dancer that's just left competition and looking to get into a show, then the actual thing to do is to go to Riverdance, Lord of the Dance, because they can offer you a large salary. If you're looking to do bits and bobs, it's hard to offer that kind of sustainability for dancers that are leaving competitive dancing, so I'm not sure there's enough people to warrant a [a non-traditional Irish dance] class. You know that are going to take that risk, because I know I'm going to learn this new style and hopefully get a few gigs with this person, this person, or create my own work. There's not enough of a professional base yet like there is in contemporary dance or like there is in tap dancing, for instance, for you to be able to hop from job to job or create work yourself in the interim, so it's a funny place at the time.

So from a business sense, Peter questioned whether alternative Irish dance classes would be financially worthwhile both in terms of attracting students and for their professional opportunities afterwards. It is a significant argument that in comparison to other dance forms, Irish dance does not have such a broad professional base of jobs. And indeed, reverting back to that question of 'serious and skilled dancers', it is likely that competitive dancers would be chosen for Irish dance shows over non-competitive dancers, at least until non-competitive schools are more established.

A key benefit of non-competitive schools is to learn in a more sensitive, thoughtful way. Colin reflected on this:

> Lots of people who I know in the arts scene have asked me would I teach Irish dance because they or their kids would like to learn it but learn it in a little bit more of an open, embodied way rather than kind of you know bang it into them. I think it's possible, not just for me but for anybody and I think any teacher should teach how they want to teach, but I think once people get into that scene it just becomes about getting the kids ready for the next feis and it's manic, it's just manic.

Indeed, since Irish dance teachers are often so aggressive in their training methods, it would be appealing to see Irish dance taught in a way that considers how someone feels, how their body takes to the movements or not. Within the competitive world, this is clearly not a priority when the focus is on producing the best dancers for the next competition.

Competitive schools rarely provide classes for adults, because few adults compete who have not already danced for their entire lives. So it often seems that adults dancers who are new to Irish dance are not taken seriously. Potentially non-competitive schools could provide a place for adults to learn Irish dance. Indeed, Colin argued: "I think you know just people who have kind of set up, I suppose, mainstream teachers who then set up adult classes or *Riverdance* classes or show dance classes I think just tend to be slightly patronizing to adults because they just assume that they want to come in and have a bit of fun. Which is fine, to have a bit of fun but it's like what if they actually want to learn it seriously, not serious but…" I said to him: "Properly?" And Colin responded: "Yeah learn it authentically as opposed to being treated like oh you're an adult, 'lets just get you up on the floor, put you in a line and make you clap your hands and stamp your feet and aren't you brilliant'."

Non-competitive schools would also ideally focus more on experimentation, creativity, and performing, and nurturing these aspects in their dancers. This is something that certainly does not often happen in competitive schools. Indeed, Kristyn said of non-competitive schools:

> I think they're great, because I see them do a lot more shows and that is wonderful for a child to build their confidence, to just get out and perform, it's … I applaud the non-competitive dance schools because they're concentrating on the tradition and the dance instead of this competitiveness, which is healthy to a certain extent, like I did enjoy competing, but I can understand that child that competes all the time and never wins, not that I always won.

It is interesting how Kristyn feels that non-competitive schools are focusing on the tradition and the dance instead of competing. It could be argued that competition is actually very traditional, having been around since the end of the nineteenth century, and not being competitive is actually very non-traditional. But, indeed prior to the end of the nineteenth century and the Gaelic League's involvement in Irish dance, competition was not the priority, and step dance was taught by itinerant dancing masters and step dance teachers who travelled around Ireland to share the practice as a leisure activity (Foley, 2001). Leighann Kowalksy from the D'amby Project also feels that her non-competitive school is more focused on the "tradition". What is it that they consider to be "tradition"? Perhaps it is a focus on learning the dance form and other elements of the history of Irish dance, including having a deeper understanding of the music or of old dance steps. Perhaps they see the intense focus on competitions today, the high number of competitions per year, the extreme amount of money placed into them, and the pressure on the dancers to be the best, as all elements that are not "traditional". Here "tradition" is associated with a positive feeling of sharing a historical dance form, learning it to be a part of "Irish tradition", and for some, learning it to practise one's Irish heritage. There are certainly notions of tradition as a passing down of a practice from generation to generation, and this being done in a way to share and keep alive a "tradition". Whereas a focus in competition is on constantly improving one's dancing, becoming faster, lighter, jumping higher, and being able to perform increasingly challenging moves.

Non-competitive schools could also potentially have more of a community feeling, without the overt competition to divide them. And perhaps dancers in these schools feel better about themselves, and about their skill and ability as dancers, because they are not being constantly compared to each other. Kristyn argued that feelings of inadequacy from competitions can affect you for years later. She reflected on her competition days:

> I always got second which right now I can laugh about but as a kid it was a little detrimental and the person who got first was my best friend from my school and that can play mind games and you can hold onto that for your entire life. So to have the non-competitive dance schools, I'm sure there's still competitiveness within that, who's front and center, but I see them, non-competitive dance schools more as a whole, they're a team, an ensemble."

Non-competitive schools are clearly a contentious issue amongst interviewees as they debate questions of skill, motivations, economic viability, teaching styles, tradition and community. It was incredibly interesting and valuable to visit the D'amby Project, a non-competitive Irish dance school in upstate New York, to explore how they teach and perform Irish dance without being a part of the competitive scene.

D'amby Project

I visited the D'amby Project in Red Hook, upstate New York in May 2017. It is a non-competitive Irish dance school and company run by Leighann Kowalsky and Rowan Willigan. On their website they describe themselves as offering "dance classes beginning with traditional Irish training and advancing to contemporary. Our company has performed widely throughout the United States and traveled internationally. Founded in 2012, the D'amby Project is a safe and constructive space for young people to move, create and become themselves." They are different from a traditional Irish dance school in many ways, the fact that they do not compete, they train their dancers in contemporary dance as well, and they are also a dance company, so they see themselves as a professional performing group.

What is interesting about the school is that Leighann and Rowan had never competed in Irish dance. Not being part of the competitive world freed up their creativity and their ideas of what they could do with their school. For those who grew up within that world, it was much more difficult to reject it, or do something different, or simply even imagine something different while risking being judged by those who taught them or their childhood dance companions. Leighann and Rowan trained with Solas an Lae, a local non-competitive Irish dance school started by Deirdre Lowry who was herself a

competitive dancer, but also trained in ballet and contemporary dance theater. Deirdre describes her school on her website as the "School of American Irish Dance" offering "traditional Irish dance from the beginner through advanced and the best practices and disciplines of classical ballet and contemporary dance." I would have been interested in speaking to Deirdre about her decision to start a non-competitive school coming from a competitive background, but once she heard I was speaking to the D'amby project, she didn't want to speak with me. There are some issues between the two schools being similar and both near each other in a small area. However, Leighann said that when they were dancing with her, they did not also receive ballet and contemporary training. She felt that the aesthetic of their dancing looks very different now in comparison to when she was there. And she felt the philosophy of the two schools differed in that Deirdre's was more serious and strict, and hers is more about "collaboration and having fun and playing with each other's art forms" which she felt was central to Irish culture.

Indeed, after browsing through the website of Solas an Lae, I gained the impression that it was a more regimented and serious school. A list of rules on the website described everything from strict instructions on how the dancers should be dressed to when parents are allowed to meet with the teacher. One of Leighann's dancers used to dance at Solas an Lae and she said she was afraid to ask questions of her teacher at Solas An Lae but she was not like that now, she felt more outgoing. I felt like this was evidence of the usual authoritative teaching methods within Irish dance, despite Solas an Lae being different and non-competitive. In comparison, the D'amby Project's website portrayed them as welcoming, friendly, and supportive, which I certainly found them to be.

The classroom atmosphere was calm and collaborative and yet students still danced to a high level. Rowan mentioned how many years ago she had taken a class with Donny Golding, a competitive Irish dance teacher based in New York who was her former teacher's teacher. She said she just remembered all the shouting and did not want to go back. Indeed I never observed any shouting in their classes, in contrast to so many Irish dance classes. Even when the students were rehearsing a piece for an imminent performance, it was very calm. This was particularly surprising given that rehearsals are usually a very stressful time in a competitive school when shouting would be common. I wrote in my diary that the classes at the D'amby Project also seemed collaborative in that the teachers danced in the performance with the students, therefore they also trained

with them in the class, not just shouting at them from the seat in the corner as so often happens in a competitive Irish dance school. Leighann mentioned that one guest Irish dance teacher at her school spoke harshly to her dancers the first time he taught at her school. She said he was used to teaching competition dancers in that way, and the next year he came back, her dancers did not want to sign up and put themselves through that again. Leighann said she was proud of them for recognizing that they do not have to put up with that. And she believes they don't need to be taught that way to achieve results. It is promising that the same teacher has since taught there and adapted how he engages with the dancers in response to this feedback.

In the D'amby Project school, all classes began with an aerobic warm up on the spot of various moves and then stretching, which all lasted about 20 to 25 minutes. This was a very long warm up in comparison to an Irish dance class in a competitive school where there may not even be a warm up or sometimes they go straight into high intensity drills of Irish dance moves, which is very different to a general aerobic warm up. They then move on to various exercises across the floor such as walking with feet turned out, flat on the foot and then on the toes, then doing Irish dance skips and over two threes. In one class they did kicks with arms out at their sides and feet flat on the floor and on the toes. In a competitive Irish dance class we would only do these kicks on our toes, with our arms in at the sides, and skipping at the same time in between kicks. It was interesting to see the slight or more major differences in movements. An older age group class did modern kicks to the side and then out to the back, with the torso leaning forward in a horizontal line. This was very different to see as in Irish dance the torso never moves from the upright position and leg movements are all out to the front, not to the side. This group then did their Irish dance jumps followed by contemporary jumps. It is interesting how the dancers moved swiftly between Irish moves and contemporary moves, and a type of combination of both. Leighann said she is mostly trained in Erik Hawkins style modern dance so that is the style she has in her body and that is what comes out, unless she makes active decisions to move differently. Another difference was seeing the students dancing barefoot, and when I saw them, I thought of all the Irish dancers at the Fusion Dance Fest who hated doing Kristyn's contemporary piece barefoot because Irish dancers are so used to dancing in socks at least, and usually socks and shoes.

The D'amby Project dancers do pieces that are quite traditional but not fully, as they include other contemporary movements or different things such as arm movement, head movements, or parallel feet. Then they also do completely contemporary pieces. The dancers said they now recognize what is Irish and what is modern in the choreography. For the dancers from an Irish dance background, learning the contemporary was difficult and for those from a contemporary background, learning Irish was difficult. But now they felt they embodied both and it was easy to switch between them.

Leighann talked to me about her training in Irish and contemporary and how she trains her dancers and what their dance style is like. She was initially trained in Irish dance and then later in her teens trained in contemporary dance. So she feels it is important for her dancers to also initially train in Irish dance and then she introduces contemporary dance to them later on. She explained:

> So we have a particular style when we're dancing and I think it was both from having Irish training from a very early age rigidly, and then secondarily coming into a contemporary training, so we're able to wield our arms in a not awkward clunky way but our natural movement choices we might make, don't look like normal contemporary, like something about them is different and a lot of people who don't know that we're trained in Irish say like, "Your contemporary work, what is different about it, something is so different about it?" And we'll be like 'oh ho ho we have a secret, we're actually Irish dancers'. So if we want our students to be able to emulate that same style, we think they need to be trained that same way, like strict Irish and then we'll give you that so that your instincts go Irish you know, so that's kind of the idea behind training them first in Irish and then secondarily in the contemporary. And we have a group now of about 6 or 7 dancers who are just that, they've trained with us from a very young age in Irish dance, now contemporary and like when we're all dancing together we look the same, like we do have that same style so it's working (laughing) which is really exciting, we're like 'yay'!

The intensity levels of the D'amby Project classes compared to competitive dancing were notable. At the D'amby Project dancers rarely sweated as much, whereas in a normal Irish dance class we are often worked so hard, we're told to push through to the end of the dance and maintain the energy to the end. Conversely at the D'amby Project choreography often included walking and was not always about high impact skipping or jumping for the entire time. There was clearly a focus on a safe warm up and body conditioning at the D'amby Project. All of the older children and teens finish their class with 25 to 30 minutes or so of pilates type work on core, back, legs, arms, sitting on a mat on the floor. Again this was unusual for an Irish dance class. I had previously done some core work in an Irish dance class but not for this long. However, Marie and others argued that core work and body conditioning is being taken more seriously in the competitive world in recent years. Another group of younger children grabbed a tennis ball from a box at the end of their class and used it to massage their feet. I have never seen that in an Irish dance class before, but it is something that I know to be valuable just from my own research on stretching and massage.

The dancers at D'amby Project also seemed to have more input into choreography than dancers in a competitive school, thus creating a more participatory and democratic as opposed to hierarchical system of teaching (Carter, 2000). I watched one group of young dancers between the ages of 9 and 11 working on a group choreography. There was one point where dancers moved their arms in a fluid way around their torso and head. I noticed that the children really enjoyed this and were smiling as they did it. Leighann later told me that was a move they came up with themselves and she put it into the choreography. She mentioned about not wanting to "snuff" them. They frequently gave her ideas for choreography, and she would say, "I love your choreographic ideas". I thought it was great that she does not want to stifle their willingness to share ideas. In my research at the competitive school, I did notice dancers sometimes coming up with their own steps and asking if they could put something in their dance. But so often it does not really happen. The focus on the competition means that the teacher usually determines the steps. Unless a dancer is of a very high level, perhaps a World Champion, and then they would sometimes have more say over their steps, or more of an opportunity to create their own steps.

It was really valuable to be able to speak to some of the D'amby Project dancers about why they danced, and to explore the argument I had heard that dancers need competition to motivate them. They said to me they dance to keep improving or progressing, expanding their knowledge or capability, and continue working on technique. One girl said she was interested in choreographing in the future. Another said she aims to do better in each show; therefore she is motivated by the performances and makes personal aims to make each performance better than the last. Another said she goes to dance class as the D'amby Project because it is a family and she likes to be there with everyone. The reasons for dancing varied, but it is clear that competition does not need to be the only factor motivating dancers. Most of them wanted to learn more and improve, sometimes for a future career, or just for themselves. Indeed Leighann reflected on this:

> So if they choose to make this their profession beyond high school, they're going to be performing not competing and so I think they value the professional experience that they're getting, far more than any like medal in a competition would motivate them. That being said, I think it stands true similarly from a pushing themselves further function and like our student who competes in Irish dance is the top student in her school and she gets 95% of her training from us. And like Joel will tell you, like Joel has told us if any of our kids competed they would sweep you know like our kids have good technique and like strong abilities but they also have a performance quality that's more genuine than some of the competition dancers. And so I actually think they stand out from that perspective but I don't think our kids have any trouble pushing themselves and pushing their abilities and pushing their techniques because they have these performances to be looking forward to. I do think that a lot of our kids are looking at making this their profession and that's why they also value the contemporary training, the ballet training, so they're even pushing their bodies further still than strictly competitive Irish dancers are because they know what's going to be required of them if they do make this their profession."

Throughout our discussions, Leighann often seemed to emphasise her dancers' skill and knowledge, arguing that they are at the same level or above competitive dancers. Potentially this comes from a feeling that non-competitive schools are seen as outside the norm and possibly a bit behind the competitive dancers, so she wants to argue that they are just as good.

I spoke to Leighann about whether the dancers knew about the competitive world of Irish dance and if they then wanted to be a part of it and she said:

> Yeah so our dancers are aware of the competitive world of Irish dance and the competitive world of contemporary dance and many of them understand that our philosophy as an organization is that dance should not be competitive and that there are certain mental negativities involved with competition in dance you know like everywhere from just a really competitive mind set in classes to eating disorders, you know like everything. And a lot of it is born in those places where it's competitive and I think we have one student who also dances competitively for a school in New Jersey and we're so totally accepting, totally supportive if that's what you're doing, that's fine. I do see a negative effect on her.

Leighann discussed how two other girls, sisters, were competitive contemporary dancers and one of them developed an eating disorder that Leighann said "has only come up since she started dancing competitively". Leighann said she didn't prevent the dancers from taking part in the competitive dance world if they wanted to. She wanted them to make that decision for themselves and understood that some children liked it.

Despite the D'amby Project being so open to new and different aspects of movement, the gender norms of the competitive Irish dance world appeared to persist. There appeared to be just one teenage boy at the D'amby Project, and he had a range of other dance experience. I was interested in whether Rowan and Leighann would teach boys to dance differently. In a contemporary class, I have never noticed a distinction between movements for men and women. As Rowan and Leighann are contemporary dancers as well, I assumed they would be gender-neutral in their approach to teaching Irish dance to

boys and girls, men and women. When asked whether they taught boys differently, Rowan said she did not, while Leighann said she would not teach them a slip jig, a dance that is traditionally done by women, and no "girly" arm movements. Thus as Hall (2008) has argued, even here in this progressive setting, the ideas that male dancers have to appear "masculine" persists.

Within competitive Irish dance schools dancers learn particular dances, and across the range of dance schools, this is usually fairly standard. In a competitive school, dancers will learn light jig, single jig, slip jig, reel, treble jig and hornpipe. Light jig and single jig are usually only done by lower level dancers, so as the dancers progress they stop doing these two. Then often a range of traditional and non-traditional sets which are hard shoe dances, and also often the group dances, so 2-hand, 4-hand, 6-hand, or 8-hand. For dancers in the senior levels they will have a specified soft shoe dance, hard shoe dance, and then their chosen set dance to perform at every major competition. So many focus on perhaps a reel and treble jig all year, and then switch to slip jig and hornpipe the following year. However, boys and men never do slip jig and Leighann adhered to this. Yet, in comparison, at Leighann's school, she seemed to pick and choose which dances her students learnt, and this was partly dependent on music. She said:

> We're heavy in reels because everyone's heavy in reels in both shoes and yeah we do treble jig and slip jig, we do less light jig and less hornpipe but they're all terms these kids know and more than knowing them, our students I think, most of them anyway, know what the difference is musically. So they know that a jig is 6/8 and a reel is 12/4 and they could count that for you and they could say ok so if that's the case you know a batter of four counts sounds like this in a jig and sounds like this in a reel and they understand the marriage between the music and the dance which is important to me for them to know that because then how can you ever work with a musician if you don't know that and that's how Irish dance started so you better know that (laughing). Yeah so they do learn all those things but we're totally heavy in reels and yeah in reels mostly because then if you're using music to track to practise there is more opportunity to play with reels than there is other things, so we are heavy in that.

This is significant, as Leighann appears to want to emphasise her dancers' knowledge and understanding of music and the range of dances despite the fact that they do not usually work on them all, like a competitive dancer would. Again, Leighann aims to emphasise that her dancers are as skilled, or more so, than competitive dancers, thus illustrating that to some extent, she feels that they are seen as beneath or behind the competitive dancers.

The relationship between dance and music also contrasted, such as Leighann's focus on reels. Indeed there are often pop songs that are in reel time, you could dance a reel to them, but you could not dance any other dance to them. This illustrates her focus on performance and also her focus on using various types of music in class. The music used in the D'amby Project class and performances was often very different to traditional Irish music used in competitive Irish dance classes. There was often pop music, hip hop and raegetton sounds. Some was a combination of Irish with these various styles such as the music from Afro-Celt Soundsystem. It was great to see such different types of music being used and this influenced me in my teaching, as I used some of her recommendations.

My trip to the D'amby Project also influenced my teaching in other ways, and concerned how Leighann engaged the children in learning through games and fun. With her youngest group of dancers, aged 5 to 7, Leighann had one of the kids play the role of the teacher and lead the stretches with tips or suggestions from Leighann. They agreed that each of the kids would have the opportunity to be leader in the next few classes. This was a nice way to engage the children in the practice and not just tell them what to do. I used this in my own class, finding it was a brilliant way to keep the kids focused on warming up and stretching.

At the end of the class with the youngest group of dancers they played a game, which involved pulling a paper out of a jar and performing a particular animal's movements, for example, a snake slithering along the floor. The person who pulled the piece of paper would perform the movement and the other students would guess what the person was doing. Then once someone guessed correctly they all got up and performed the movement. I was also inspired by this, and often ended my class in a game, and at one point did something similar but with dance moves on a sheet of paper instead of animals.

With her youngest age group a lot of time was spent managing the children, as they were a little bit rowdy, easily distracted, and sometimes not wanting to dance. Leighann would take them by the hand and do the simple over two threes with them. She said they seemed more distracted than usual because I was there. I felt my group of dancers were often similar to this, somewhat disruptive and difficult to manage. And I was surprised because they were older, between aged 9 and 11. Rowan said to me at one point that teaching dance was a lot more difficult than she thought it would be and I agree with this. This is something I will expand on in the next section on teaching.

My teaching

As I have already shown traditional competitive Irish dance is often taught in a domineering manner where the teacher creates a learning environment in which mistakes are unacceptable and harsh verbal criticism and shouting is the norm. Here competition is emphasized over an appreciation for the effort or self-improvement that a student makes. In my contemporary dance practice I noted very different teaching methods, the environment was positive and more student focused, teachers appreciated the dancers who were thanked for their efforts and achievements. In contemporary dance there is often a focus on providing dancers with creative freedom to take a set piece of choreography and change it in way that feels good for the individual. Indeed, there is often time to improvise and move naturally as an individual, without being critiqued for not moving in the "right" way. There is always a proper warm up, and usually a cool down, and a focus on thinking about how movements feel, not just how they look.

My efforts to explore how Irish dance teaching could be more learner-centred drew on dance education literature which focuses on how dance teaching can be more responsive to students, encourage their confidence and expressiveness and feel motivated and appreciated (Carr and Wyon, 2003; Coe, 2003; Green 1999; 2000; Fortin and Sienedtop 1995; Mainwaring and Krasnow, 2010). In order to explore the possibilities of applying these approaches to teaching Irish dance, I set up an after-school Irish dance class in a local primary school near my home in north London for children 8 years and older and from September 2017 to December 2017. I wanted to explore alternatives to the standard model of teaching Irish dance, through considering child-centred methods of teaching. I wanted to create a positive learning environment in which the children could learn Irish dance and have fun. I intended to place a focus on safety through warm-ups

and cool-downs. I also planned to allocate time for the children to create their own dances. I wanted them to not only be able to learn a dance from a teacher, but also feel confident that they could create choreography themselves and move in a way that feels good for them as individuals.

In order to prepare for this teaching I sought practical guidance in dance pedagogy, exploring how to teach, what to say and do, how to encourage creativity and what the best methods were to ensure a child-centred focus. I gained specific training in Safe and Effective Dance Practice from Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in London, which enabled me to consider in more depth issues of safety in the Irish dance class and how to maximize safety. I also had one-to-one tailored training from Dr. Lorna Sanders from Trinity Laban on teaching dance to children. My teaching was deliberately planned to take place after I had done all of my fieldwork which included undertaking a range of Irish dance classes, contemporary dance classes, speaking to interviewees, and visiting the D'amby Project in New York. As a former champion Irish dancer I have extensive knowledge of the dance form itself, so I was able to teach them the basics of Irish dance. My research enabled me to consider what were positive ways of teaching that I could draw on and what were the negative ways of teaching that I would avoid.

I planned to begin each class with a warm up to prepare the children's bodies for dancing. I then intended to teach the children one basic movement from Irish dance each week, such as skips, sevens, over two threes, and others, and planned to go over already learnt movements throughout the weeks. I then wanted to teach the children basic choreography, so that they would learn a light jig, reel and slip jig by the end of the semester. I wanted to teach one dance each week and go over the already learnt dances in every class. And I intended to add more to the dances over the semester to increase them in length. Following the learning of a dance, I wanted to take time for a guided improvisation which would vary each week. I then intended to end each class with basic stretches as a cool down. My plan changed somewhat as the realities of teaching became apparent.

Order and Control

A recurring theme throughout the semester was the struggle to maintain order and control. In the first class I found the children energetic, a bit chaotic, loud, and needing

continual reining in. This often occurred throughout the semester. It would be difficult at times to get the children to do as I asked, and I understood more how dance teachers could end up resorting to an authoritative style of teaching to maintain order. A couple of girls mentioned to me in the first class that they tried an Irish dance class once and the teachers just shouted the whole time so they did not go again, but they liked my class because I was 'nice'. The girl who was already an Irish dancer said that her teachers shout a lot because all they want to do is make her good for the feis (competition). It was interesting that this was brought up by the children, and not something I asked them about. Teaching in a kinder way was a key priority of my class so I was glad that they perceived it to be more enjoyable and friendly. But I did wonder if the reason I struggled to control them was that they perceived me too much as their fun friend and not as a serious teacher.

For our first class we did a contemporary inspired warm up, which was also suggested by Lorna from Trinity Laban and in my safety training. This contrasts with how Irish dance classes traditionally begin which is often with drills or jumping straight into difficult aerobic movement. This type of gradual warm up is intended to be safer for the body, as you begin moving more and faster as time goes on. We begin by walking around the room filling any empty space; we warmed up wrists, elbows and then all of the arms as we walked. We did various activities as we walked to engage the mind and also create fun, so at one point we smiled at each person as we walked by, and then we would walk as close together as possible. We then stopped on the spot to march and hop, and do calf stretches. They found the calf stretching awkward, and I struggled to get them to do it properly, they would say, "this doesn't do anything!" Then we jogged around and I would say 'one' and everyone had to touch the ground and I would say 'two' and everyone would have to jump up, a technique that was used in a contemporary class I attended. This helped to ensure they were listening and focusing, and raised their heart rate. We did a bit of stretching again at the end, and everyone seemed to enjoy the warm up. But unfortunately this did not continue.

When I tried to do our contemporary inspired warm up during the second class, the children were not focused. They were running around, not really doing what I asked, and just doing bits of it. After this class, I used the tactic of having the children play the role of teacher and lead the warm up. Instead of just having one child lead it for that class, I

would often let every child be the leader if just for a couple of minutes. This worked well, as the children were very excited about the opportunity to lead, everyone got the chance to lead so no one felt left out, and by only leading for a short amount of time they didn't run out of ideas. This warm up method became my standard for the semester and was a successful way to maintain some order, keep the children engaged, and enable them to feel like they had more authority over an element of the class.

Prior to teaching the class, I took it for granted that the children would listen to me and do what I had planned in an orderly, structured way. In any Irish dance class I had taken, the children knew to do skips across the room one by one, and wait their turn. They knew to dance their dance for the teacher again on their own, or in twos, but in an orderly fashion. Simply waiting their turn, not pulling at the teacher to watch them when they wanted. In my class, I often had the children do skips across the room but they tended to skip in a big group with me, which felt chaotic. For a while they needed to watch me to be able to follow. I also felt if I was not doing it too, they would just do something else. My taking part encouraged them to take part. However, I got to the point where I managed to get them to do their skips one by one and this meant I could watch them. I would have liked them to be more ordered in dancing for me, for example going in groups of two or three to show me and then the next group going. But they created issues about who they were grouped with, or when they were going. They said, "oh don't want to dance with him" or "I want to dance with her, or I want to dance on my own." These are things that would never come up in a competitive Irish dance class, you would just get up and dance and know you had to.

Another issue that I had not anticipated which caused disruption was the children asking to get water at various times throughout the class. This happened in the first class, but once I was aware of it, I only allowed one break half way through the class which worked a lot better, with less disruptions. The children were not very happy with this rule to start with, but they gradually accepted it. There were other instances where I had to implement rules, which were difficult to get the children to follow. There was a lot of gym equipment in the hall where we held the class, and the children were often climbing all over it and I had to constantly tell them to get off, which was very difficult and disruptive. I would tell them once and they still didn't take it seriously, so it became constant. If one child asked to go to the toilet and I let one go, then they would all

decide they needed to go and it felt like chaos. On one day one girl kept asking me could she get an apple, and I said no, then she asked could she get one and just put it on the side, and I said no several times to all her various options about getting an apple. She responded annoyed and said, "You're mean". I let them all eventually get an apple or drink during the break time. I tried to create rules about when they could do things, and what they could do, but sometimes it felt like I was in their space, in their school which they knew and felt like they could do what they wanted in.

One day during the time where I allowed the children to make up their own dance, I told them they could not use any props at all. Practically every week they asked to use a bench or a chair, sometimes standing on it, or jumping over. I found myself always struggling with their requests for this, as sometimes they would fall jumping over benches, so I would rather they did not use them, but they pleaded constantly and I often gave in. So on this day I told them no and they got angry about this. They were really challenging me. One girl said they wanted to use a ball and I said no and then she said "let me just show you how we want to use it" and I said no as I did not want any exception to the rule. Then I took the ball off her but I had to almost pull it from her hand, as she was grabbing back and refused to let go. Then I told another girl that she could not sit on the bench and she said "how about this?" while hovering over it and again I said no. I reiterated to them all that there would be no props, nothing at all, just themselves and the floor and I said they would have to get creative. One of the girls responded in an annoyed way and said, "Well that's not very creative." They were all very angry about the lack of props but I had to stick with it once I made the decision. Prior to teaching the children for that semester, I really didn't expect how difficult managing them would be. As the semester went on I became more confident in creating order and telling the children 'no'. But some days were truly difficult and disheartening.

In one class, one of the girls cried on and off for the whole class, without any apparent reason. It seemed like she was trying to make herself cry, to gain attention. But this was distracting for the other children, as they were constantly going over to her and coming to me and saying, "she's crying". I said to them that she would join us when she was ready. I went up to her a couple of times and asked what was wrong but she said nothing. She joined us on and off, but kept crying. Another girl sat out for most of the class, saying that her ankle was sore. She said it was always sore but that today it felt

worse. Yet, she got up and danced a few times. Then at one point she said, "oh I banged my foot again". The only boy in the class constantly said "I don't want to do it", "I can't do it", "bit embarrassing really". And it was a struggle of repeatedly encouraging him to come and dance.

In another instance, a girl had a moment towards the end of the class where she stopped dancing and got angry saying she "couldn't do it", she "wasn't any good", and she "doesn't know why she signed up". I told her she was doing great, she knew it all but she said no. So I let her sit out, and she was distraught, crying in the corner. I went over and asked her to join, and then I asked her what's wrong and she said she wanted to speak to her granny, but her granny was dead, and she burst out crying more. I asked her sister who was also dancing if she thought the girl was ok and she said, "yeah I think so". So I assumed this was something she did regularly. In this class, overall I felt that I struggled to manage the children. I wrote in my diary that it was draining trying to manage all of them running off and doing other things, sulking and crying, and not wanting to dance. I really felt disheartened, and it became very real to me how difficult teaching a class of children to dance could be.

As the semester progressed I did feel that I became more confident in creating a sense of order and controlling the children. However, sometimes this came from giving up a plan, instead of seeing it through. As the classes progressed, I rarely did a cool down as it became very difficult to encourage the children to do so. They did not understand the purpose of the stretches, they would usually do them incorrectly or question me, saying that they were "easy" and "not doing anything". When I was struggling with them on lots of other tasks, I felt almost like this was my least important battle, so I would let this go. I probably should have tried harder to explain the importance of the stretches and teach them how to do them. But I felt so overwhelmed with managing the behaviour and encouraging them to participate, that I didn't want to add another task to my list. I preferred that they ended the class happy with a game, instead of having to force them to finish with a cool down.

Creativity

Another theme of the class throughout the semester was creativity. This was something I was actively trying to bring to the classes, as I felt it was strongly missing from a normal

Irish dance class. One of the earliest moments of creativity in the semester came from one of the girls asking me if they could play 'duck, duck, goose' Irish dance style in the first class, so I let them do this and I thought it was a great way for them to have input into the class. They took the standard 'duck, duck, goose' game where the children sit in a circle, one person walks around the circle, tags another person who has to get up quickly and try to chase and tag the first person before they sit in the empty spot. They had also thought of how to make it Irish dance based by doing Irish skips instead of running. This moment of creativity showed me how easily the children could be innovative and I thought to myself it would be good to let them come up with a game each week that they could make Irish dance style.

In another instance, early on in the semester, two of the girls wanted to show me the dance that they had been working on. They held hands and decided that they'd each do opposite legs, so one did the right leg and one did the left. I was about to say that makes it harder and confusing, but I didn't and it was interesting to me that this was how they wanted to show it to me. It was almost like a little show, making their own creative decision by doing it together with opposite legs. In the third class, we reviewed a dance which I had taught them. I told them to go over it in groups and then show me. They seemed to really enjoy this chance to work together and do a little performance. One of the groups held hands in a circle and did the dance, which was just so unusual and creative. You would never get Irish dancers in a regular Irish dance class get up to show you their dance and decide to hold hands and do it in a way you hadn't taught them. Moments like this really inspired me to how creative kids can be if their creativity is not stifled by being told to do something perfectly, and only one way being the right way.

I then told the children that they were going to make up a dance including some Irish dance in it and they loved this idea. Some wanted to be together, others wanted to be on their own. One of the groups said they wanted to do a 'skit with Irish dance'. They acted out a scene where they pretended that they were at music class but not enjoying it so they start dancing. They were all facing the wall and started dancing, doing the tendu exercise (a ballet exercise performed in a standing position, working on pointing the toes and lengthening the leg out in front and bringing it back to the body again) I had taught them. Then each turned around and they did the light jig, each taking a turn in the middle while the two other girls circled around them. This was great to see them coming

up with something so different. To encourage their creativity, I tried to compliment everyone on the unique things they added in to their dance, or the unique things they did.

One of the children who was already a competitive Irish dancer was eager to perform on her own, and I think she used her own steps from her competitive school. Her choreography was the most traditional; the only bit she added in was a jump over a bench or a cartwheel. She seemed to struggle the most with creativity, and likely this comes from knowing the dance form so well and therefore struggling to imagine it differently, or break free from the norms. Another girl who had initially struggled with creativity was one of the oldest girls. She was a bit concerned about what she should do, saying she really didn't know. I said to her that I had seen her doing spins and contemporary moves so I told her she could a light jig with spins added in. So she did this adding in ballet and contemporary moves. I wondered whether her initial concern came from her age, being slightly older and more aware of doing things "right" or "wrong" and feeling less freedom towards playing or experimenting. I was happy that with encouragement, she embraced making something up, and drawing on skills she already had from other styles of dance.

I had asked all the children what music they wanted for their creative performances, an Irish dance tune, or a pop song, and the only boy in the class asked for two songs to dance to. He wanted a Justin Timberlake song to do a hip hop dance to and then an Irish song to do some Irish dance and while he was performing he gave me a signal to change the music. I liked that he thought of something different to do. Virtually everyone loved performing, but sometimes there was a struggle to balance order and creativity. This boy was difficult to manage in class, several times he would just lie on the floor in the middle of everyone and I had to tell him to sit out if he was not going to dance. After he did his performance, he sat out again. Then he wanted to jump up and dance when everyone was performing, but I told him he couldn't because he didn't get up and practice with everyone beforehand. He wanted to take part in the more 'fun' activities- performing and creating- but he did not always want to take part in the practicing or learning elements.

Indeed, an interesting issue with encouraging creativity is that the children often want to go straight to making up their own little performances, instead of learning basic steps. One time after they had done their skips in the traditional way, I told them they could

add in arm movements in any way. Somehow this caused them to change what the feet were supposed to be doing and add in spins as well. I think one did it and the others followed, but I let them do this. I wanted to allow this creativity. However, it was difficult to balance encouraging creativity with ensuring they got a solid foundation in technique and steps.

One day towards the end of the semester I played a game for the entire class, but it was a game that included reviewing all of our dances and movements. Thus I found I really successfully incorporated both fun and creativity in terms of how to learn, and I was able to encourage the students to remember and practice the basics. I found this game online when I was searching for games that could be done in dance classes. I wrote down different dances or moves on pieces of paper, put in a bag and had each person pull one out. The person does this dance or move for everyone, and then they all get up and do it together. I gave them each a sticker when they were done as a small reward. They really enjoyed this game; they were very excited about it. On this day, the boy was not in class and I found it went easier without him distracting the group, and without having to constantly encourage him to dance. I also taught them a new move on this day which they learnt very quickly.

It was very interesting throughout the semester to see how the children embraced their creativity. As performers, they all came to have a niche in some way, one of the girls loved to bring in contemporary dance movements, four girls always worked together doing a skit, and the boy always did hip-hop. It was very rewarding to see the many different ways that they were creative with Irish dance.

Final Performance: Order versus Creativity

Our final performance was interesting in terms of the struggle between order and creativity. In our last class the children's parents came in to see what the children had learnt. I told the children that I had a short piece that I'd created for them to perform and they wanted to know if they could also make up their own dances and I said yes. I asked them all what groups they were going to be in, as they always worked in groups happily, and always picked their own groups. However it didn't work well this time as the boy was left on his own, but he wanted to be in a group, but no one wanted him in their group. I tried to encourage a group to welcome him, but they would not agree. So I then

tried to encourage him to do something on his own and told him how he always did well doing his own hip hop and Irish dance mix, but he told me he didn't want to do anything on his own.

When I checked in with another group they had split from four to two groups of two. One of the groups had the competitive dancer in it and a younger girl who struggled with some of the dancing. When they showed me their performance it was mostly the competitive Irish dancer dancing on her own. So I told them to try and do more of the same movements. Then the girl in this group who wasn't the competition dancer wanted to join the other group of two but they said they already made their choreography and couldn't add her back in. They also said she didn't join them in the first place because she didn't want to do a skit. So then that girl became upset.

We moved on to work on the group piece and I had to struggle with them to get them to focus and do it. I had to raise my voice at times to tell them to pay attention and work because we didn't have much time. When we started, the children had issues with where people were in their lines and who was holding whose hands. In the midst of this the girl who previously became upset, started crying and ran off, saying that she didn't want to do it. We were all telling her to come and do it but she said she didn't want to. So I told her we would have to do it without her as we were running out of time. We practised it without her the once, and then the parents came in and she was still crying in the corner. One of the other girl's parents went up to her and then as we were about to start she ran over and decided to join. Despite all of the difficulty, the little performance that I had choreographed ultimately went really well and I was happy with it.

However everyone became shy about their creative routines, the one thing they had loved so much all semester. They all of a sudden didn't want to be creative and mostly wanted to show the set steps with just Irish music instead of the pop music they often chose. There was a request for Christmas music which I didn't have, but I offered other music and I encouraged them to do their creative routines including contemporary or hip hop, but they didn't. The competitive Irish dancer did add some cartwheels into her dance, surprisingly, but she was mostly doing all her own steps from her competitive school. They were all really eager to show everything though, they did their skips and

kicks across the room, and even basic exercises. They kept it going for ages, at times I think they didn't know what to do they just wanted to keep performing for the parents.

Clearly they loved to perform, and this was evident in the final day. However it was very strange to me that they didn't want to share their own choreography, which they enjoyed so much. I wonder whether they could sense somehow that these were things they'd made up and therefore not serious enough to show the parents. Perhaps they wanted to show their parents 'proper' Irish dancing, and what I had taught them as Irish dancing.

Overall the semester of teaching enabled me to see how difficult teaching children to dance can be, in terms of maintaining order, especially when striving to have a child-centred and positive learning environment. It became easier to understand why some teachers may resort to creating a stricter environment, where the teacher is the ultimate authority and leads without consideration of the children's feelings. Yet the semester also showed me how incredibly creative children can be, and that with a little encouragement, they are confident to be independent and make their own dances and performances. If I were to undertake teaching children again I would seek to establish clearer rules from the beginning, which would ideally help to maintain some sense of order. Also, I would intend to be in a space other than the children's school, where they seemed to feel like they could do what they want because this was their space. But I would certainly aim to continue encouraging the children's creativity, and teaching in a way that respects the children and provides them with positive reinforcement.

Conclusion

Being a competitive Irish dancer means accepting sometimes difficult and detrimental norms such as the high cost of costumes, pressure from teachers to be the best, rigged competitions, domineering teachers and increasingly difficult and often unsafe movements. Despite these negative aspects of the practice, it is clear that the competitive world is unlikely to change drastically because industries and businesses are built around the busy competition circuit and most teachers remain committed to evaluating skill through competition. Thus non-competitive schools could provide a positive alternative to this system.

The innovative choreographers I interviewed broadly welcomed the idea of teaching Irish dance in new ways, and several have taught their styles to competitive Irish dancers, but these students had mixed reactions. While some dancers appreciated new methods and having their eyes opened to innovative and interesting ways of doing Irish dance, others felt like they were no longer dancing 'properly', in the manner that the competitive world would expect of them. There was also a struggle for those who have trained extensively in the Irish dance world to use their imagination and become creative with Irish dance, when they are so used to seeing it occur simply in the competitive and show forms.

While choreographers could see the value in non-competitive schools teaching Irish dance in a more student-centred and safety focused way, with an attention to self-expression and creativity, they were not certain that dancers in these schools could have the level of skill and technique of competitive dancers. Indeed, when competition is the sole focus of the dance training, then it is clear that the dancers' level of skill would be high as they are constantly motivated to be better. But within non-competitive schools there is also another motivation to be skilled dancers, and this comes from the opportunity to perform. However, those within the Irish dance world are likely to see these schools as inferior until they become better established and more widespread, or have the backing of a significant figure from the competitive or show Irish dance world.

My practice-based research of teaching Irish dance in a local primary school enabled me to explore the reality and potential difficulty of applying some of the more learner-centred methods of dance teaching to an Irish dance class, such as incorporating creativity. Through my teaching, I found that two main themes emerged and overlapped: order and creativity, and the difficulty of maintaining order while enabling creativity. Despite the challenges, I saw how the children could both learn traditional Irish dance steps and apply and develop their creativity in a space where these are equally encouraged.

It remains to be seen if the influence of the competition network is too strong for these non-competitive schools to thrive. However, if non-competitive schools continue to grow and expand they could change the way Irish dance develops. These schools could have performance companies attached to them, like the D'amby Project, which would

provide students with regular performance opportunities. These schools each have their own individual style of Irish dance which is determined by each instructor's unique background, and so we may see a return to a freer style of teaching and regional dance styles similar to that which existed in Ireland prior to An Coimisiún's standardization of Irish dance. Thus, there could arguably be a return to a more "traditional" style of Irish dance in which the form varies from school to school, with influences from other movement styles. What might appear as a departure from the tradition of Irish dance as institutionalized in competitive dance, both returns to and revitalizes an older tradition of Irish dance teaching, this time in the extended international geographies of Irish dance.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

In 2018, Jean Butler founded *Our Steps Foundation* (2019a) "a non profit organisation that creates and produces artistic and academic projects that inspire and expand the way we think about the history, practice and performance of Irish dance." The foundation is significant for its dual aim of preserving the practice's history while also focusing on how it can continue to grow in the future, as illustrated by its subtitle: "*An Irish Dance Legacy Honoring the Past and Inspiring the Future*." The first project under the foundation was *Our Steps, Our Story: An Irish Dance Legacy*, a collaboration with the New York Public Library of Performing Arts Jerome Robbins Dance Division, and "the first archive solely dedicated to preserving the solo steps and stories of Irish dance master practitioners and style influencers from An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha" (Our Steps Foundation, 2019b). Thus while she has dedicated herself to expanding the canon of Irish dance, the ways it can be presented and what can be considered Irish dance, she is also prioritising preserving the practice in its 'traditional' form, by recording dances from as early as 1958. Like the other choreographers whose work I have explored in this thesis, Jean is not simply changing Irish dance but deeply engaged with what it means to be a participant of this traditional practice.

This thesis has been about innovation and tradition in Irish dance teaching and choreography, exploring the motivations behind the choreographers' decisions to make new forms of Irish dance, the practice and performance of these dances, and how they are being taught. This research explored several questions such as: How do innovative choreographers define their work in relation to ideas of tradition, authenticity and cultural mixing or 'fusion'? How do choreographers and dancers of alternative forms of Irish dance consider the question of meaning and content within their work? How are performances by innovative choreographers evaluated by them, and what are their perspectives on how they are evaluated by those involved in competitive step dancing and the wider public? What are the challenges and possibilities of teaching skill and technique in Irish dance while also encouraging self-expression and creativity? I have attended to these questions and others through practice-based research, taking part in a range of dance classes, and teaching an Irish dance class myself. By engaging with these

questions, through this practice-based research, interviews with key choreographers, and observations of their work, I have found that this movement is not simply a replacement of the old with the new, but a more complex process of choreographers' trying to remain true to their tradition, while seeking to escape from traditional norms that have shaped them, yet sometimes struggling to see and think beyond these norms.

This thesis thus contributes to the study of dance in cultural geography in three key ways. Firstly, it contributes through its original empirical focus on innovative Irish dance choreographers and dancers. The cultural geographies of this group of cultural practitioners have not been the subject of significant existing research and this thesis describes and examines the key institutions, individuals and networks that constitute the world of alternative Irish dance choreography and practise. It has explored the depth of the practitioners' own reflections on ideas of skill, value, meaning and tradition and innovation in their work and considered how their perspectives are reflected in their choreography and in their teaching. It has done so in ways which are attentive to the legacies of Irish cultural nationalism and to the contexts of economic, cultural and social change in Ireland over the last three decades. My exploration of the complexities and subtleties of their approaches to questions of cultural authenticity, tradition and change both in their articulation of their perspective and in their practice is a significant empirical contribution in itself and feeds into the conceptual contribution of my research.

Secondly, this thesis contributes to research on the cultural geographies of dance and to cultural geography more broadly by addressing dance through an analytical lens focused on questions of culture, authenticity and change. It addresses these themes though an approach to dance which pays attention to the local, national and globalized aspects of the dance, the dancing body, and networks, spaces and scales of dance practice. My research thus extends work in geography on dance which explores how local, unique dance forms are affected by globalization, and increasing standardization and commercialization (Aoyama, 2007; Dunbar-Hell, 2003). However, this research is innovative in engaging with a dance form in terms of it being a cultural practice that had strong nationalist connotations, and exploring how that is addressed and reworked in the present. However, instead of just juxtaposing the traditional and the modern, the local and the global, I argue for the importance of attending to the subtle and potentially

progressive ways in which ideas of authenticity, tradition and change are understood by these cultural practitioners and can be understood more widely in scholarship and society. The choreographers' rejection of the legacy of Irish cultural nationalism in Irish dance and the ideals of cultural purity and homogeneity does not mean that they espouse an idea of 'anything goes' or simply celebrate cultural hybridity or 'fusion'. Neither do they seek a return to a 'pure' and 'fixed' form as a reaction to the globalized and commercialised dimensions of Irish show dance. They hold on to the distinctive 'spirit' of the dance form but do not tie that to ideas of preserving Irish dance. Instead, they argue that the 'authenticity' of the dance form should be respected and new work should be true to this, but this is not an 'authenticity' based on a fixed and pure ideal of the dance form, but on a careful, sustained and meaningful exploration of its distinctive traditions through choreography, teaching and dance. This research thus explores the possibilities of an inclusive and progressive understanding of culture, especially place-based cultures, that reject ideas purity or fixity but also acknowledge that simply celebrating change and diversity does not adequately address how the value of tradition to people and the value of thinking of tradition as the complex combination of continuity and change. My research on the teaching and learning of dance is also a key original contribution since it engages with the embodied and social dimensions of the 'passing on', practising and performing of tradition.

Thirdly, this research shows the value of using a wide range of methods to explore dance, through observation, interviews, and also practice-based research which not only involved taking part in learning, but also teaching dance. This range of methods allows an in-depth engagement with the material which would not have been possible through only using qualitative interviews or solely focusing on a practice-based approach. While this research is part of and extends work within geography which has turned to creative and embodied practice-based methods (Crang, 2010; de Leeuw and Hawkins, 2017; Lorimer, 2005; Marston and de Leeuw, 2013), especially through teaching dance as a research method, interviews were also incredibly valuable for exploring the meaning of dance for those involved. Instead of just examining the choreographers' work by viewing it, interviews ensured that I explored what choreographers' think about their work, what issues they considered as they created it and what they were trying to achieve with their performance. This research thus shows the value of combining practice-based and in-depth qualitative interviewing in researching dance in cultural geography.

In this conclusion I draw out the key findings of my research by returning to the question of 'What is Irish dance?'. This has been a constant debate throughout the practice's institutionalized history, as new movements and changes to the style have been brought in for the purpose of advancing the skill of the dancers, creating a dance form that is commercially successful on the world stage, or the more recent changes made by those choreographers who are seeking to create a more 'artistic' practice that, for some, also explores present day issues. Over the last twenty years, especially, various changes to the style and form have been critiqued by those within the Irish dance world for not being true Irish dance, as the show dance choreographers have borrowed movements from ballet, added arm movements and hypermasculine, hyperfeminine and often sexualised dance style, especially for the lead role, and with the drastically increased athleticism of the competitive Irish dance, that includes expectations of higher jumps, more technically challenging movements, and more movement across the floor. Thus change within the dance form is not a new phenomenon, but a constant throughout its history, both before – through the influences of other dance traditions which shaped it as a folk dance – and after its institutionalization as a national dance.

Choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance have been redefining what Irish dance is at a time when many Irish people have been reconsidering what it means to be Irish. *Riverdance* was created during the Celtic Tiger period, from the early '90s to the early 2000s, which significantly transformed Ireland. The economy grew, immigration became the norm instead of emigration, and the country secularised and liberalised in many ways. *Riverdance* was illustrative of how the Irish were being seen and saw themselves – successful, empowered, modern, and keen to project this version of Irishness to the world. At the time, *Riverdance* enabled Irish dancers to be proud of their practice, a practice that prior to that had often been seen as old-fashioned and open to ridicule. The success of *Riverdance*, meant that competitive Irish dance world experienced an influx of new dancers around the world who saw this exciting spectacle and wanted to learn how to dance themselves. Thus, in the same way that Ireland was attracting immigrants and returning Irish nationals because of the apparent wealth and progress of the country, the competitive Irish dance world was attracting new dancers from around the world to this exciting and 'new' (to many) dance form. *Riverdance* influenced the competitive Irish dance world which became more "modern"; the dancing became increasingly more

athletic and the costumes increasingly "flashy" and expensive. Thus the effects of the Celtic Tiger were also seen to spill over into this traditional national practice.

However, after the economic crash in 2008, Ireland experienced significant levels of unemployment and emigration, and the Irish people had to grapple with this change and what it meant for how they saw themselves and their country. Ghost estates – unfinished housing developments that were abandoned during the economic crash – were a visible reminder in the Irish landscape of the excesses of the Celtic Tiger period. Likewise to many Irish dance choreographers who starred in *Riverdance*, the show, and the many shows that based themselves on its model, later became a symbol of excess and glamour without substance. They no longer felt the show's narrow view on Irishness was representative of themselves and their peers in the present day. The last three decades have seen profound challenges to the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland and deep changes in social attitudes that underpinned the legalisation of divorce, same sex marriage and abortion, all changes to the law that were arguable unimaginable 20 years before. What it means to be Irish today is very different to what it meant 30 years ago.

As I have explored in this thesis, many choreographers of new forms of Irish dance have addressed the key issue of the 'Irishness' of Irish dance, and their work both reflects and is part of wider cultural engagements with the legacies of Irish cultural nationalism and the economic and social changes in 'new' Ireland of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Some of their work is explicit in its exploration of questions of identity and of being of Irish origins outside Ireland, such as Marie Clerkin's piece *The Bad Arm*. Other work is direct in focusing on the modes of Irish dancing that they feel reflects both the commercialization of Irish dance and the continued restricting norms of show dancing. Choreographers like Suzanne Cleary and Peter Harding of *Up and Over It,* ridiculed *Riverdance* and the competitive Irish dance scene through their dance videos and performances, openly questioning the norms that exist in the competitive and show dance worlds. Their video *Alles Gut Zum St Patrick's Tag* had robots in place of dancers who were switched on to perform for St. Patrick's Day. As I explored in chapter 5 much of their work has addressed the ways Irish dancers are taught to move in certain restrictive and gendered ways, and are not allowed to veer from this and rejected the gendered conventions of competitive Irish dance. In doing so they challenged the continued legacy of ideals of embodied Irishness in Irish cultural nationalism.

The work of these choreographers reflects and contributes to cultural explorations of changing attitudes to the body and sexuality in Ireland. As I addressed in chapter 4, Breandán de Gallaí explored sexuality and ageing in his performance of *Linger*, which featured two men who danced together. This coupling was revolutionary for Ireland, where a few decades ago it was not possible to be openly gay, but it is even more revolutionary that these men danced together as part of a performance, where heteronormativity means it is rare to see two men dancing as a couple, and likely unheard of in Irish dance. Appearing in the show as an older dancer who was 49 years old, when dancers in shows like *Riverdance* are usually in their early 20s, was also pathbreaking. In contrast to the ideal body in Irish cultural nationalism – a body that is young, strong, graceful, skilled and sexually pure – that profoundly shaped the development of Irish dance as a competition based national cultural form, Breandán de Gallaí's work rejects this ideal and foregrounds an idea of embodiment that allows for aging. He and other older choreographers are opening up a space for the older dancer to be seen and appreciated. Yet the emphasis on skill, epitomised in youthful dancers, remains a powerful framing of quality in Irish dance. While his performance intended to show the differences between the younger and older dancer, he was in reality dancing at a highly skilled level where the differences were not hugely apparent. The norm of appearing incredibly skilled was arguably not something that Breandán could easily escape and he pushed himself to match the level of skill of the younger dancer. Indeed, some of the choreographers and teachers explored in this research struggled with not appearing "skilled" or their dancers not appearing "skilled' in comparison to other competitive Irish dancers, which illustrates how ingrained the norms of Irish dance and the ideal Irish body are, and how difficult it is for them to create work that does not adhere to these norms. The dancers and choreographers whose work I have addressed in this thesis thus engage with, contribute to and reflect wider social and cultural change regarding sexuality and embodiment and at the same time are working through questions of skill and quality in relation to a specific embodied practice. For many, their work and perspectives often reflect their complicated relationship to mainstream competitive Irish dance. They challenge the centralised, homogenised, institutionalised and standardised world of Irish step dancing but many are also implicated, as competition judges and teachers, in maintaining a continuity of values, approaches, and organisational structures, that derive from the creation of Irish dance as a national dance form.

Yet, many choreographers are also creating a new definition of "skill". Influenced by contemporary dance, their work is now informed by release technique, improvisation, and a consideration of the best ways to utilise upper body movement. Thus many choreographers were now moving in ways which were the antithesis of a 'skilled' Irish dancer according to modern competitive and show norms. They often have a more relaxed carriage, less elevation, and less complicated and intricate Irish dance movements, in favour of stripping back to the basics. It is arguable that as older dancers they have to create new definitions of skill which match what the ageing body can physically do, so that they are no longer judged on speed, elevation, sharpness and complicated movements that they may not physically be able to do anymore. Colin Dunne, Kristyn Fontanella, and Kieran Jordan all spoke of adapting their dancing to what their bodies could do. But it is also clear that these new definitions of skill are part of a desire for their work to be seen as art, and for this art to be based on something other than the athleticism of the dancer. These new ways of moving could arguably be seen as a return to a more "traditional" style of Irish dance from the past, which also had a more relaxed carriage, less elevation, and more simple movements, before the dance form was codified by national dance institutions in the early twentieth century. Indeed, in Colin Dunne's performance *Out of Time* (2008), he projected archive film footage of older styles of Irish step dancing while he was performing, thus inviting the audience to consider the connection between them.

This return to a more "traditional" style can also characterize non-competitive Irish dance schools. These schools aim to transmit this traditional practice but with a focus on learning and performing styles that are inflected by their own preferences and perspectives in ways which echo the local teaching and regional variation of dance in Ireland prior to the institutionalization of Irish dance by the Gaelic League and An Coimisiún. These innovative teachers are sharing their own unique styles depending on their dance background. Many have trained in contemporary dance or other dance styles, and have their own individual thoughts on how Irish dance should be done, and are teaching this to their students. Some of these teachers are encouraging their students' creativity and involvement in choreography, as I did in my own teaching. However, as my research has demonstrated there are challenges with striking the right balance between teaching the basic movements and encouraging creativity, as the children often prefer having the freedom to make up their own dances, rather than concentrating on

learning the traditional steps. Innovative teachers are also often trying to teach in a kinder, more child centred way than the competitive teachers, but this comes with the challenge of how to maintain order and structure in the class. Another challenge faced by non-competitive schools is the perception by others that their dancers are not as skilled as competitive dancers, which is how many innovative choreographers felt. Despite these choreographers' overt rejection of many Irish dance norms and their dislike of the competitive Irish dance scene, many struggled to imagine that non-competitive dancers would be serious or would be motivated to improve without competitions. In some ways these choreographers struggled to abandon the definition of 'skill' that they have come to know, which they could replace with a definition that incorporates other qualities such as stage presence, ability to express emotion, choreograph, improvise or know how to practise safely and take care of the dancing body.

As my research had demonstrated, one key debate for choreographers of alternative forms of Irish dance was whether their work should be considered "fusion" or something original. Most were keen to emphasise that their work, which often draws strongly on contemporary dance, was not a fusion of Irish dance with contemporary dance, but instead something entirely new and authentic; the result of embodying both Irish dance and contemporary dance, not an attempt to add some contemporary movements to an Irish dance. They believed that dance performances or style based on superficial combination of different dance traditions were inferior to their work, often an easy way to try to be interesting to audiences, but not artistic, deep or true engagement with the traditional practice. Thus while they are seeking to change the practice, they are very conscious of doing so in a way that respects and honours the tradition. In this sense, their dance work is reflective of Kirby et al's idea of "dynamic rootedness" which espouses a sense of geographical and historical locatedness but not fixity or stasis and encourages an active engagement with a collective past this is viewed as resource to address the present in inclusive, critical and progressive ways.

They do not espouse the view that any innovation is valid. These innovative choreographers are rejecting many norms of Irish dance, like postmodern choreographers rejected the norms of ballet, however unlike postmodern choreographers, they do not believe that anything can be considered an authentic innovation in Irish dance. Most felt that the work they are producing needs to be

meaningful and expressive of something, whether this is a deeply personal artistic engagement with the form, or wider social and cultural issues of age, sexuality, and ideas of Irishness, rather than simply being entertainment. This is reflected in the way their performances can sometimes clearly be understood as addressing a particular theme, and sometimes more obscure in their meaning and discomforting for audiences. Despite a range of views on the question of meaning, they had strong opinions on how an alternative piece of Irish dance should look, in terms of the sorts of movements included and how they are performed. So while these choreographers sometimes felt judged by others within the world of Irish dance for producing work that may not be considered Irish dance, they too had a clear sense of what could qualify as a "good" innovative work in Irish dance and created their own standard that they judged themselves and other by. Thus they are part of a history of debating what constitutes an Irish dance, and how this cultural practice can or cannot change.

However, what is distinctive is the desire of innovative choreographers of Irish dance for their work to be seen as art. Indeed, Jean Butler's *Our Steps Foundation* "legitimizes Irish dance as a source of inspiration, research and creativity, connecting the form to the greater dance landscape" (Our Steps Foundation, 2019a). Thus there is a desire to bring recognition to Irish dance work and give it the artistic status of other forms of dance. Innovative choreographers do not wish to be constricted by audiences' and viewers' expectations of a dance performance that is called 'Irish dance', and some wish for their work to just be seen as a dance. Yet, it is impossible to separate their work, which has been significantly shaped by Irish dance, from that cultural practice. Their perspectives on how tradition can or cannot be changed, clearly shows that they do not wish to simply detach themselves from the tradition. The desire to valorize the dance form is not new. It can be read in the efforts of those who institutionalized Irish dance in the early twentieth century for whom its moral as well as cultural value was crucial, as part of anti-colonial cultural nationalism that insisted on the cultural value of Irish traditions and moral purity of the nation in response to English discourses of Irish inferiority. It can also be seen in late twentieth century efforts to challenge the characterisation of Irish dance as folk dance and thus 'low art' in comparison to the practices of ballet or contemporary dance. While not necessarily becoming 'high art', *Riverdance* was clearly a desire to show how Irish dance could be an exciting spectacle worthy of Broadway, not just a cultural practice that, up until that point, was often viewed as 'old fashioned', of

little creative value and dominated by excessive concern with costume in competitive step dancing. Within the competition world, there has been a desire to elevate the dance form which has become more technical and demanding throughout the years. Yet, while in many ways, choreographers' desire for their work to be seen as art is not new, but a point of continuity in this cultural practice's history, it is their insistence on individual creativity as artists that is novel and the degree to which they combined this with their emphasis on the integrity of tradition. In this way they express a model of tradition that includes the significance of individual creativity within a shared cultural practice (Revill, 2005).

This research has explored the question of what is Irish dance *geographically*. The specific historical geographies of dance forms such as ballet and contemporary dance are largely elided in the characterization of these forms as international 'high culture'. Irish dance is overtly defined through a national point of origin. It has been shaped by a national and institutional history and diasporic geography. These key choreographers and innovative dance schools are all based in Ireland or countries where the Irish diaspora moved to in large numbers, such as the UK and the US, in particular, cities like New York and Boston, which have significant Irish populations. As I have explored in this thesis, some choreographers feel limited by audiences' expectations of the Irishness of *Irish* dance. For many who associate with an Irish heritage in the diaspora, Irish dance which does not seem to overly reflect that heritage or that challenges conventional images of Irishness may not been judged to be Irish. Yet this is not to suggest that there is a simple geography of innovation in Ireland and conservative adherence to convention in the diaspora, or alternatively that Ireland is the place of cultural authenticity in contrast to the diaspora (Gray 2002). The *Our Steps Foundation*, for example is clear in its focus on Irish dance in Ireland and in the diaspora and includes American Irish dance teachers as key figures in its work of archiving Irish dance. There is a more complex geography to the different approaches to tradition, with innovative choreographers working in social and professional networks that link Ireland, the UK and the US and with the more conservative Irish institutions also dominating competitive Irish dance in these countries. Yet the place of origin continues to matter. While many of these innovative choreographers could have studied contemporary dance at any university in the world, they chose to study at the Irish World Academy at the University of Limerick, where the only Irish dance courses at university level exist in the world. They returned to the

"source" of their practice, in Ireland, and to the Irish World Academy, where successful Irish dancers are taken seriously and respected.

While this research has explored the question of what counts as Irish dance through the perspectives and practice of innovative chorographers, the question of who counts as an 'authentic' Irish dancer in Ireland and abroad deserves further research. Most participants did not feel that it mattered if one were Irish or not to be taken seriously as an Irish dancer, yet some who lived in America felt that they lacked some sense of authenticity by not having a strong connection within their family to Ireland. In what ways are those who dance Irish step dancing in Ireland and abroad viewed according to racialized ideas of the Irish or diasporic Irish body? The archival material gathered in by the *Our Steps Foundation* will be "celebrated in a groundbreaking multidisciplinary performance installation to premiere in 2021 in Dublin". Entitled *The Stepping Fields,* this performance *"*confidently places the Irish body, past and present, under meticulous examination in an aim to reintroduce the form and engage new audiences in the lost cultural dance history of Ireland and the diaspora" (Our Steps Foundation, 2019b). Irish dance is figured as a living tradition and shared heritage. But are there limits to the diasporic inclusion and what might be meant by 'Irish body'?

The practice of Irish step dancing thus links together the intimate scale of the body to national and diasporic geographies and the multi-sited networks of choreographers and teachers that revolve around the geographical origins of the dance but are not contained by it. This research has explored dance in terms of the symbolic significance of embodied movement and the ways the practice and experience of embodied movement is shaped by historical and contemporary cultural discourses and debates as well as the physicality of bodies, that emerge, circulate, evolve and conflict in particular sites and locations. For these choreographers and teachers, how the dancer's body moves in learning and performing Irish step dance reflects an approach that does not oppose individual creativity and tradition. The authenticity of the movement depends on a respectful return to and innovative reworking of this cultural form.

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